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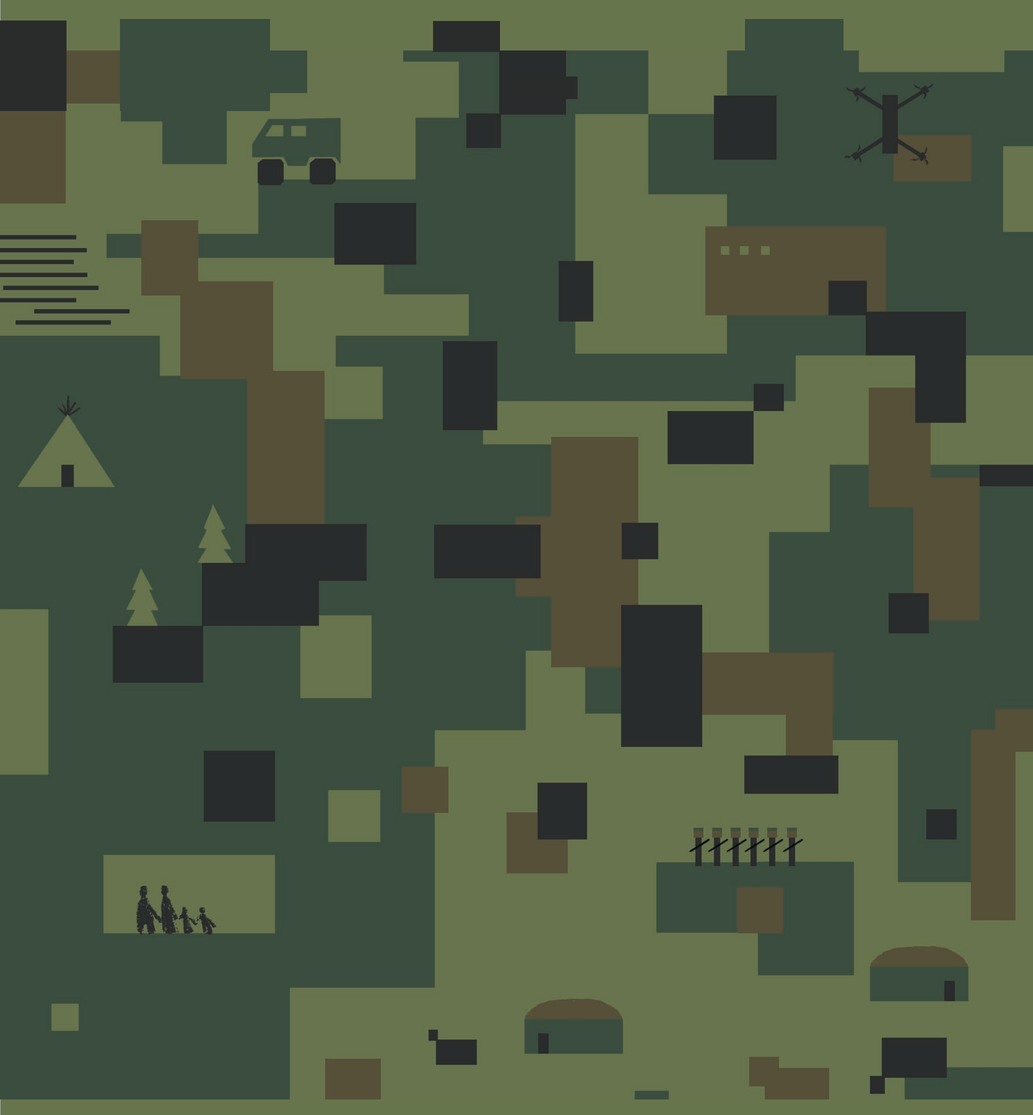
WAR AND STATE AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES IN RUSSIA



ETHNOLOGIA POLONA

INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY
POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

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S P E C I A L   I S S U E

INTRODUCTION: WAR AND STATE AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES IN RUSSIA

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This issue of Ethnologia Polona is devoted to the integration of ethnic diversity in Russian warfare from an anthropological perspective. This is our response to repeated references in public discourse to the participation of non-Russian peoples in the war. There are reports of a disproportionately high number of casualties being mourned in Russia among non-Russian peoples, but Western media also portrays non-Russian cultures as being the backbone of the Russian war effort. Stereotypes and prejudices regarding the lack of humanistic values among non-Russians are propagated, take, for example, an extreme but telling statement by Pope Francis (America Magazine 2022). This shows how distorted the perception of ethnic and cultural diversity is in relation to the war against Ukraine. One reason for this is certainly limited knowledge but perhaps also the insufficient depth and breadth of social science research carried out among non-Russian peoples. This includes such questions as the level of their integration into state war policy and propaganda, the role of ethnic diversity in Russian military operations and armed conflicts, as well as those concerning military mobilisation and ideology and the reaction of the non-Russian population to it. Compared to other geographical regions, especially North America, it is striking that the literature on Indigenous warfare and military culture and especially on participation in contemporary wars is relatively scarce (Sheffield and Riseman 2018, Gorter-Gronvik and Suprun 2000, Poyer 2022). This is all the more astonishing given the importance of the memory of the Second World War in public discourse and military propaganda inside Russia today. More recent armed conflicts, such as the war in Afghanistan, the wars in Chechnya and the war in Ukraine, are all placed in this context in public memory and, above all, in state propaganda.

In the last three years, some scholarly work on these issues has been produced, in particular by researchers with roots in Indigenous communities themselves. A section of five articles appeared in issue 25 of the journal "Inner Asia" in 2023 (Zhanaev and Jonutytė 2023, Yangulbaev 2023, Vyushkova and Sherkhonov 2023, Khovalyg 2023, Dolyaev and Dugar-DePonte 2023), followed by an article by Sayana Namsaraeva (2024) on the perception of war and war victims among the Buryats, published in the same journal a year later. Also in 2023, an article by Alexey Bessudnov (2023) analysed the disproportionate number of deaths among Indigenous soldiers from a demographic perspective. The Buryat researcher and anti-war activist Mariya Vyushkova presented her research on the participation of Indigenous minorities in the war and the disproportionate number of casualties at international conferences (Vyushkova 2024), with results confirmed by the observations on Chukotka made in Kerghitageen's article in the present *Ethnologia Polona* issue. This thematic issue of *Ethnologia Polona* corresponds with the aforementioned papers, as it also incorporates the voices of native researchers and activists. At the same time, the papers collected in this journal are written from a different temporal perspective – more than two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, we present a mix of perspectives by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers alike.

The Soviet Union existed for nearly 70 years, while the transitional period of political, economic and social change known as post-socialism has already lasted over 30 years. The inertia of the Soviet system, which hindered states and societies in their efforts to adapt to the market economy and democratic principles, has often provided the interpretive framework for understanding most of the processes taking place in the former Eastern Bloc countries (Buchowski 2021, 82–85; Cima and Sovová 2022). This framework has inadvertently perpetuated several Soviet state-building myths, such as the Soviet Union's radical break with the Russian Empire and the emancipatory, anti-colonial nature of the Soviet political project (Kravchenko 2015). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, followed by the full-scale war in 2022, revealed that imperialism — not socialism — is the most enduring element of Russian state ideology and social resentment. Russian military expansionism, which has victimised Georgia and Ukraine and politically and economically subjugated countries such as Belarus, has created a demand for a revision of scholarly perspectives over the past three decades. In recent years, post-socialist regions have increasingly embraced postcolonial theory and the idea of decolonisation.

The war has acted as a catalyst for political, theoretical and ideological transformations in the post-socialist space, also for ethnic and national minorities. As a result, a revision of the relationship between the Russian state and its ethnic minorities is necessary. Although the term "minority", whether ethnic, linguistic or cultural, is commonly used in both academic and legal documents, it is often uncritically generalised. The minority position is not simply given but created through the policies

of those in power. In many cases, borders have been drawn and population policies pursued in such a way that the Indigenous population has been put into the position of an ethnic minority position that often limits their collective agency and their opportunities for self-determination. Nevertheless, we and most of our authors have chosen to use the term "ethnic minority" in this issue to refer to the demographic and political situation created by colonial processes.

The new relations between the state and minorities are being shaped by the following five factors: (1) the significance of Indigenous soldiers in the war on Ukraine; (2) the unprecedented scale of political emigration among minority activists; (3) the formation of politically active diasporas connected through transnational and horizontal ties; (4) the introduction of decolonial vocabulary into the political discourse of the Russian opposition, with either an affirmative or dismissive intention; and (5) increased pressure on ethnic minorities to demonstrate loyalty to the Russian state and its imperial projects.

Two opposing developments in the sociopolitical fabric of ethnic minorities in Russia have become apparent since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022. On the one hand, pro-Kremlin elites within ethnic groups are demonstrating absolute loyalty to the central authorities, urging their compatriots to fight among the ranks of the Russian army and support the war effort, rallying around the figure of Putin and "demonstrating Russia's national unity". On the other hand, émigré politicians and activists have taken radically opposing positions, seeking to mobilise ethnic minorities politically around anti-war and decolonisation stances – including calls for the post-Putin break-up of Russia into independent national states. Thus, anti-war organisations comprising transnational networks of activists, which are key manifestations of counter-power (Graeber 2004), engage in discursive practices and strategies that oppose the military involvement of their compatriots in the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In contrast to pre-war ethnic activists, this new form of activism creates a network of horizontal relationships among ethnic minorities, realising their common interests and developing a common political agenda. This new phenomenon calls for urgent research to map the actors involved, to understand their demands and to analyse the practices and discursive strategies in which they engage. Given that transnational activism is a fundamental expression of grassroots counter-power and social resistance in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we argue that a proper recognition of the current networking processes, practices and discursive negotiations will be crucial for understanding the new social, political, environmental and cultural activism among ethnic minorities and the political landscape of a potential post-Putin Russia.

The war has shown that despite three decades of intensive research on and within Russia, there remains much to be understood about the mechanisms of power, the images of the state and the intricacies of hierarchies in the country. The ongoing

war initiated by Russia raises many research questions: What role does this war play in the life of Russian society? What makes it understandable, even acceptable for people in Russia? From an anthropological perspective, it is essential to ask how everyday life is shaped by state action and how the state is understood and experienced on the grassroots level. Contemporary anthropological studies focus on issues of political power and subordination, multiple forms of inequality, economic vulnerability, social discontent, colonisation and its effects, strategies of resistance, negotiation and cooperation in the face of different forms of domination (Yusupova 2023; Jonutytė 2023). There is a growing need for deeper reflection on the relationship between state power and citizenship, civil rights, economic inequality and exploitation, and strategies of resistance and adaptation, as well as the transformational processes of national, ethnic and civic identities, taking into account issues of intersectionality and different forms of social hierarchies (Zmyvalova 2022; 2023b; 2023a). Studies of the intersections of gender relations, especially masculinity, with ethnic diversity and centre-periphery relations remain a major desideratum. The impressive role that issues of gender, sexuality and reproduction have played in Russian propaganda during the war and the focus of state repression against activism supporting gender diversity and equality, makes research on Indigenous gender configurations, especially masculinities, and their transformation and mobilisation in Russia's war effort all the more necessary (Tarasova 2021; Dudeck and Habeck 2021; Habeck 2023).

The editors of this special issue therefore set themselves the task of inviting authors from social anthropology, who have experience conducting research with Indigenous peoples in Russia to publish their research and reflections on the topic. It turned out, however, that many potential authors, although knowledgeable about the subject, were unwilling to publish for a variety of reasons. We feel it is appropriate to discuss these reasons briefly and also in order to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the texts collected here represent only a small part of the production of knowledge and that our endeavour was inevitably of a provisional and fragmentary nature.

One of the most frequently cited reasons was the lack of opportunities for direct fieldwork and open, unhindered dialogue with those affected. For many colleagues, anthropological research seems legitimate when it focuses on a topic by exploring the motivations, conditions and potential actions of the actors directly, allowing the researcher to interact with research partners and experience the social context firsthand. Many researchers doubt that full-fledged anthropological research is possible solely based on the evaluation of information collected in the past, or via secondary sources and communication at a distance.

The second serious reason was the uncertainty of scientific judgement on morally charged issues, such as the guilt of surrounding violent deaths of people in acts of war, particularly in view of the fact that insights into social reality are fragmentary

and judgments may have to remain provisional, researchers are reluctant to pass judgment from a distance.

There is also the ethical question of whether the publication of scientific analyses could cause harm to those involved, even of a symbolic or political nature. Finally, there are the risks to researchers who, even if they are not conducting research in Russia, have important social ties there, often including relatives and close friends. Publications on the activities of ethnic activists pose a particular risk; on 26 July 2024, for example, the Russian Ministry of Justice added 55 ethnic activist organisations and foreign academic institutions to its list of extremist organisations. These organisations were described as structural divisions of what the Russian authorities termed the "anti-Russian separatist movement" (Bryant 2024). Any contact or cooperation with members of this alleged movement is automatically criminalised. Forms of repression, which can also affect family members in Russia, also make emigrants abroad very cautious.

Nevertheless, given the stereotypes prevalent in public discourse and the research desiderata mentioned above, we felt it was important and necessary to offer the authors a platform to publish their insights and reflections in a special issue of Ethnologia Polona. We have deliberately kept the topic relatively broad in order to shed light not only on the present but also on the past. We have not limited ourselves to Indigenous peoples or so-called Indigenous minorities, which in the Russian context again differentiates between numerically small and large peoples and also includes ethnic groups that have lived in Russia for centuries but do not count as Indigenous peoples according to international legal criteria. The authors willing to share their research, however preliminary or fragmentary, focused not only on the mobilisation for the war but also on related areas of relations between the state and "minorities" that were affected by the war. In the papers presented in this issue of Ethnologia Polona, various levels of anonymisation and pseudonymisation had to be applied to minimise the risk of revealing the identities of interlocutors and even authors who were in Russia or who were vulnerable to state repression or other risks to themselves or their relatives, even while located outside Russia. Decisions about the removal of context and representation are never easy in anthropological research, as they can also reduce the relevance of the analysis and its refutability. In the present-day situation, the risk to research participants was clear and self-censorship was inevitable. We ask the reader to bear in mind that in the current situation, not everyone can afford to have their voice heard and that even in academic discourse, much information remains between the lines.

It was only in the course of communication with the authors that it became clear how important it is to look at our research methodology and the possibility of researching and writing about this topic, especially in the field of social and cultural

anthropological research. The method of participant observation is and remains a central research tool, but it is challenged when the mobility of the researcher is constrained not only geographically but also in an epistemological sense. Most Western anthropologists who have conducted research with Indigenous peoples in Russia have lost access to their field for a variety of reasons (Melnikova and Vasilyeva 2024; Chudakova, Hartblay and Sidorkina 2024). Many Russian scholars, critical of the political regime have left the country. Those remaining in Russia face intense direct and indirect pressure to self-censor or to publicly endorse the country's military aggression. From this perspective, for reasons of research ethics, we neither wanted to nor could invite any authors affiliated with academic institutions related to the Russian state.

However, it was important to us to include Indigenous authors and, where possible, to open an internal perspective of Indigenous communities. This is not due to epistemological essentialism, but to the recognition that social ties to relatives and friends, as well as the experience of socialisation in Indigenous communities, allow for differentiated perspectives that remain closed even to well-informed outsiders. These perspectives are crucial in this particularly sensitive case given that the communities are exposed to false generalisations, stereotypes and stigmatisation from various sides.

Being cut off from direct face-to-face communication in the regions of Russia was a challenge for many authors. The papers included in this thematic issue present a wide range of alternative research methods: internet content analysis (netnography), online interviews with respondents in Russia, interviews with emigrants fleeing conscription in neighbouring states, fieldwork in diasporas and retrospective autoethnography. Access to social networks with chat functions, telephone communication and exchange and cooperation with people who have temporarily or permanently left the country, as well as the evaluation of various self-testimonies of members of the target groups on the internet are becoming new fields of field research. Whether these new forms of interaction and participation in everyday practices can replace traditional co-presence and face-to-face communication, and what methodological considerations they require, is currently the subject of much debate. What is certain is that they pose new challenges to anthropological research, not only from a methodological point of view but also in terms of research ethics. Another way out is to turn to research data from the past. This involves not only the traditional use of historical sources from publications and archives, but also working with often unarchived and private materials that have been left behind by past fieldwork conducted by the researchers themselves or, in some cases, by others, and whose potential has often been used only to a limited extent for research questions. The personal relationships, experiences and part-time socialisation of anthropological fieldworkers

in the social contexts of the research area, which accumulate over the course of their lives, have so far received little attention in fieldwork methodology. They extend beyond short-term research projects, are associated with ethical obligations that also arise from participant observation and influence the understanding of new questions and online data.

Given the extremely limited access to fieldwork, researchers' prior field experiences and long-established relationships with research partners willing to provide information from abroad, despite repression and state-sponsored hate propaganda against Ukraine and the Western world, have proven to be crucial. Thanks to creative methodology, the authors have managed to give voice to representatives of ethnic and national minorities living in Russia and in exile a voice that, in the realm of Russian isolation and the monopoly of state propaganda, often remains unheard. As editors, we hope that we have managed to avoid wishful thinking and the idealisation of minorities, presenting both the causes of pro-war positions and the motives for active participation in Russia's military efforts within some of the studied communities and the resistance strategies and political goals of anti-war activists.

Some of the authors, such as Panakova, Minakova and Nagy, take the abovementioned approach and analyse field research data and participant observation from the period before 2022. Others, such as Baranova, Hakkarainen and Zibrova, work with emigrants outside Russia. Szmyt and Kerghitageen, alternatively, use forms of netnography, whereas Peshkov bases his work solely on historical sources. Thus, the papers published in this issue shed light on these issues from historical and ethnographic perspectives. They present analyses of the interactions between ethnic minorities in Russia and the Russian state during wartime conflicts in the imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. The historical perspective combined with memory studies is represented by papers from Ivan Peshkov and Valeriya Minakova.

In his article, "The Power of the Unburied: Quasi-Indigenousness, Limited Citizenship and Collective Responsibility of Russians in Mongolia and China", Peshkov argues that the collective imagination of the Soviet people included three demonised frontier groups disloyal to Soviet power, playing an important role in border management instruments and disciplinary narratives: the Banderites in Ukraine, the Basmachi in Central Asia and the Transbaikal Cossacks – the so-called *Semyonovtsy*. Using the example of this last group, a quasi-Indigenous group of Cossacks from the Sino-Russian border, the author analyses the specificity of Soviet practices of suspicion that entrenched border populations in a perspective of inevitable political and racial contamination, as well as local counter-memories produced in response to Soviet memory.

The relationship of minority counter-memory to official state memory is also crucial to Minakova's paper "At the Crossroads of Memories: State, Regional and Individual Perspectives on the Russian-Caucasian War among Circassians in Adygea".

Minakova analyses the gradual suppression of the memory of the nineteenth-century Circassian genocide in Putin's Russia and its replacement by a narrative of unity among Russia's nations in the fight against an external enemy during the Great Patriotic War and, now, during the war with Ukraine. Juxtaposing this state loyalty memory with the uncompromising memory of genocide cultivated by the Circassian diasporas, Minakova posits a thesis about the anti-totalitarian political potential of minority diasporas, which could become centres of resistance to the regime and generators of change in the post-Putin Russia that many expect.

Kerghitageen and Jaroslava Panáková are the authors of two complementary papers on the reaction and involvement of Arctic communities in the war against Ukraine. Both try to explain the reasons why representatives of Indigenous ethnic minorities, including the Chukchi, decide to support and actively participate in the war. Kerghitageen's text, "Chukotka and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine", based mainly on internet sources, analyses local pro-war and mobilisation propaganda, support actions for soldiers from the region and local discussions about the war and conscripted soldiers from Chukotka. Panáková in her article, "Brothers Forever. Fraternal Ties and the Dynamics of Obligation in Arctic Russia", discusses how kinship and strong fraternal ties shape the decisions and behaviour of men in local communities, where closeness can be created through common work, hunting or joint activities. Panáková argues that the most common and emotionally deep fraternal bonds are local and rooted in two social institutions: the "hunting team" institution and the local kinship system. Meanwhile, local state institutions try to exploit the concepts of fraternity and extend them to the national level. Such a research orientation is particularly relevant given the paternalistic nature of state-minority relations in Russia. The author shows how principles of social organisation based on the concept of fraternity, positioning and obligations, which are key to the bonds between men, influence the decisions of Indigenous men about military service and participation in the war in Ukraine. The specificity of dependent relations based on local social relations and obligations, combined with ethnic hierarchies and the strategic distribution of resources and privileges, has unfortunately been too often neglected in anthropological research in the past.

Contributions by Vlada Baranova and Ekaterina Zibrova examine both active and passive forms of resistance to Russian aggression against Ukraine. Zibrova, in "Indigenous Peoples of Russia Against the War: Narrative Analysis of the Stages of Ethnic Identity as a Resource for Activism", analyses the activities of anti-war and decolonial activists from Indigenous ethnic minorities: Sakha, Kalmyk, Tuvan, Buryat, Chuvash, Bashkir and Tatar. Drawing on a series of interviews, Zibrova shows how anti-war activism is linked to the construction of ethnic identity and resistance to racism, discrimination and state oppression.

Baranova, in her article "Debate on Decoloniality and Sense of Belonging Among Young Kalmyks and Buryats Who Fled to Mongolia After 2022", analyses ways of understanding the war and relations with the state among Buryats and Kalmyks who emigrated to Mongolia to avoid conscription in September 2022. Using ethnographic material, it illustrates the process of forming an anti-colonial discourse in an emigrant environment – outside the control of Russian censorship and its repressive apparatus – as well as the transmission of decolonisation ideology to wider social masses. The selected case study also describes the integration process of activists among emigrants of different ethnic minorities who, through physical proximity, intense communication, joint activities and a sense of common destiny, create horizontal ties of cooperation that can generate new structures of political resistance.

Contributions by Marina Hakkarainen and Zoltán Nagy show how war affects social relations and people not directly involved in military action, demonstrating the destructive and pervasive impact of war and war rhetoric on everyday life in Russia. In her article "Mindful Body and Geopolitical Embodiment During the War Conflict Between Russia and Ukraine", Hakkarainen discusses the concept of "geopolitical embodiment" in relation to the war between Russia and Ukraine, using personal stories to highlight how individuals physically and emotionally experience geopolitical events. Hakkarainen examines how Russian citizens, particularly those who opposed the invasion, perceive and physically internalise the conflict. She introduces the idea of the "mindful body" and uses it to frame the ways in which people's bodies can represent broader geopolitical issues, reflecting personal histories, sentiments and social relations tied to nation-states. The article highlights the profound impact of the war on particular individuals, who report feelings of social fragmentation and physical illness, prompting some to leave Russia. Of course, the embodied forms of anxiety that plague the (former) residents of Russia cannot be equated with the scale of suffering and tragedy experienced by the citizens of Ukraine, who are being bombed and killed by Russian soldiers. Nevertheless, it is an important psychosocial phenomenon that has probably become a common and shared experience for the part of Russian society that cannot bear the war and Russian crimes in Ukraine.

In his contribution "War and the Field", Zoltán Nagy reflects on the challenges of conducting anthropological fieldwork in Russia during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War. Nagy examines the strong influence of state-controlled media and propaganda on local perceptions during the war, which significantly affected his interactions with representatives of the Indigenous Khanty people and his research dynamics in the region. Under the influence of the Russian media, the local people often saw him as a representative of an enemy nation, which made his research more difficult. The thick description of his own experiences with the projections and reactions of the research participants enables him to make the personal and professional dilemmas he faced

valuable for understanding the mechanisms of propaganda and the local reactions to it. In doing so, he provides a profoundly anthropological analysis that shows how a reflective look back at one's own research material can also be fruitful for understanding the only fragmentarily accessible social reality of the present.

Zbigniew Szmyt's article "Cultural Difference: Orientalisation and Self-Orientalisation of Siberian Ethnic Minorities in the War in Ukraine" traces the current, extremely dynamic situation regarding Indigenous minorities and their participation in the Russian aggression against Ukraine. He appropriately focuses on the Buryats and Tuvans as the minorities that have figured prominently in public discourses. The author attempts to address an important issue, namely, the presence of military personnel from Indigenous ethnic groups in the Russian army during Russia's war against Ukraine. He discusses the orientalisation of ethnic minorities and the mechanism of stereotyping them as exotic Others, but also the adoption of this exoticisation as a self-image. The article analyses the relationship between the state, national ideologies and ethnic minorities in contemporary Russia and Ukraine in the context of war. The processes of self- and other-exoticisation in orientalising forms are understood as mechanisms in the construction of cultural boundaries and political lines of conflict, which today contribute to the formation of national identities. The process of orientalisation and self-orientalisation among Siberian ethnic minorities is interpreted as a significant aspect of the broader national and cultural boundary construction between Russian and Ukrainian societies.

The articles presented in this issue provide a multidimensional view of the participation of national minorities in Russia's war against Ukraine and the impact of the war on the social and political landscape in Russia's ethnic regions and among ethnic minority diasporas abroad. However, the research shows that internal processes of increasing authoritarianism in the Russian state and support for the genocidal war against Ukrainian society are accompanied by silent resistance in Russia and new political projects alternative to Putin's Russia.

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THE POWER OF THE UNBURIED: QUASI-INDIGENOUSNESS, LIMITED CITIZENSHIP AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY OF RUSSIANS IN MONGOLIA AND CHINA[1]

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Using the experience of repatriates from Inner Asia as an example, this article examines the specifics of Soviet practices of suspicion, fixing the border population in a situation of inevitable political and racial impurity. Despite the gradual withdrawal of the state from the mass persecution of people in border areas after 1953, the emotional experience of living near the border is relevant, not only in new post-Soviet contexts but also as a way to understand the past. This experience will be considered in two aspects: (1) the citizenship regime for repatriates as it, to a greater or lesser extent, related to the community and (2) the specifics of the community's responsibility for armed resistance to Soviet power. The narrative shift in the study of Stalinism and Soviet citizenship has provided a broad theoretical view of the value system and epistemology of the Soviet subject. It should be noted that this theoretical generalisation can be filled with empirical content thanks to anthropological studies of the border communities from the eastern part of the USSR (Transbaikalia). To write this article, material was used from field research conducted in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and the Chita region in the autumn of 2012, 2016 and 2021.

KEYWORDS: Inner Asia, suspicion, border regions, citizenship

Armed resistance to power is a challenge to any political theory (Agamben 2015). Moreover, if the uprising against a neighbouring tyrant is viewed favourably enough,

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in the European tradition, by political philosophy, then, when it comes to one's own home, the situation becomes more complicated and ceases to be unambiguous. From the Greek *stasis* (Loraux 2002) to Hobbes's war of all against all, we are faced with a negative perception of civil conflict as a moral and cultural catastrophe, the blame for which is transferred to external factors. In the case of the Russian Revolution (as well as with other revolutions), the situation was complicated by the problematic nature of basic concepts such as citizenship, disloyalty or loyalty to the motherland. What is the basic political order in the era of performative declarations and temporary political structures? The participants in the ensuing civil war did not feel like members of the same community and did not perceive their opponents as representatives of the state order, loyalty to which would become the basis of moral and legal assessments. These problems did not disappear with the collapse of the USSR. The legal assessment of the civil war participants takes place in a complex cultural context, which often distorts the legal foundations of decommunisation adopted by the state: the complex relationship of the Russian Federation with the Russian Empire and the USSR, the disappearance of the state that won the civil war and the imperial reading of Soviet history, creating new contradictions and, most importantly, a lack of clear criteria for reconciliation. All of this results in efforts to reinterpret the events and establish new forms of legitimacy for those involved in the Russian Civil War. The revolution is seen as a tragic transformation of one empire into another, which leads to an unexpected perception of the Lenin Guards as destroyers and Stalin as the restorer of the country. This approach, solving the problem of the glorification of the White Guard while maintaining the legitimacy of Soviet institutions, paradoxically complicates the assessment of many participants in the war. The ideological conflict becomes a betrayal of the motherland and the political struggle with the USSR after 1921 (especially the 1939–1945 period) an inhuman crime. Despite the rather indifferent attitude of the state, this context makes it impossible to make non-political statements on many historical topics, actualising the events of the long civil war as an element of the political life of modern Russia (Peshkov 2012).

The beginning of the second (full-scale) phase of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sharply aggravated issues related to decolonisation and the involvement of Indigenous and remote groups in imperial and anti-imperial projects as well as accentuated moral dilemmas surrounding armed resistance to state power. From this perspective, the long-term moral tension arising from the public revelation of a mythologised past and the imagined non-communities (Zahra 2010)[2] of Transbaikal Cossacks

2 Using Zahra's idea of imaginary non-communities as a starting point, I would like to shift the context of her application slightly. If the main focus for her is on the zone of indifference in national discourse, then my main focus is on the ability of modern societies to create imagined communities of strangers. These communities are often created without the members being aware of each other's existence.

with Russian, Buryat and Evenki origins[3] can tell us a lot about how Russian society perceives the concept of a "wrong choice". Additionally, it shows how Soviet history returns as a moral reference point for the "community of war". This example is quite interesting for several reasons. First and foremost, the unique class status of the Cossacks leads to an expected tendency towards anarchy and the use of violence. Just as importantly, the mix of culture in the community – Russian ideas about wildness projected onto the inhabitants of Transbaikalia – is equally significant. Most importantly, the location of history in a remote frontier eventually turns it into a legend that plays freely with both space and time. The blend of Cossack heritage, Asian characteristics and a distant border almost eliminates the moral responsibility of the participants, instead turning them into irreconcilable enemies of peace and frontier predators, with whom dialogue is, by definition, impossible. The purpose of this article is to present the experience of an imagined non-community that was created by retrospective projections of Soviet society and the complex work of memory in border regions, as well as the moral dilemmas involved in armed resistance against authoritarian power. The specificity of this situation lies not only in the resonance created by mass fears of anti-communist resistance networks, but also in the simultaneous intersection of racial and political impurities within the imagined non-community, transforming its members into luminous predators on the frontier. It was this ability of legends to mix temporal and spatial modalities that made it possible for grassroots practices of mass protection against members of the non-communities to emerge, which were practically unsupported by the state. Despite the state's gradual retreat from mass persecution in border regions after 1953, the emotional experiences of living near the border remain relevant, not only in the new post-Soviet context but also as a way of understanding the past. This experience will be considered in two respects: (1) the citizenship regime for repatriates as it, to a greater or lesser extent, related to the community and (2) the specifics of the community's responsibility for armed resistance to Soviet power.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this story did not end. The sudden rise of cross-border political mythologies, from unofficial political folklore to state propaganda, shows the mimetic nature of re-Sovietising, where real memory replaces the "memory of memory" and real communist ideology replaces the "memory of life with ideology" (Oushakine 2013). In this complex context of retrospective Sovietisation, border legends become an "empirical" experience of the Soviet border as

3 The Transbaikal Cossacks was a military organisation composed of mixed Russian, Buryat, Evenki members, along with Cossackised peasant communities. The hostility towards them displayed by the Communist authorities ('de-Cossackisation', 'dekulakisation' and deportations) provoked radical ethnic and social changes in Transbaikalia. Following 1917, they dispersed as a result of Red terror actions, emigration, as well as their active resistance to Soviet authorities (Peshkov 2012).

a permanent transit point. The connection of this with the new idea of movable borders and the constant search for enemies cannot be overestimated. In addition, the Transbaikal fragment of Soviet political demonology, considered in this article, touches on the problems of moral assessment of active forms of resistance and may be useful for understanding the general mechanism of militarisation among residents in Siberia's border regions.

This paper discusses the deep-seated grassroots practices that reproduce the Soviet cultural and legal order: the ability to recognise the enemy, the presence of the past and the perception of the border as a meeting place with the unknown and the terrible. The narrative shift in the study of Stalinism and Soviet citizenship has offered a broad theoretical overview of the profound influence of Soviet ideology and the influence of the institution of Soviet citizenship on the value system and epistemology of the Soviet subject. It should be noted that this theoretical generalisation can be filled with empirical content thanks to anthropological studies of the border communities of the eastern part of the USSR (Transbaikalia). This article, drawing on interviews, archival research, literary texts and memoirs, seeks to explore the reasons behind the widespread fascination with frontier phantoms. It examines how the experience of engaging with these phantoms, and the meaning of a negative legend, are extensively utilised in modern pro-military propaganda in Russia. To write this article, materials from field research were used which was conducted in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and the Chita region in the autumn of 2012, 2016 and 2021.

THE BIRTH OF NON-COMMUNITIES FROM THE PRACTICES OF THE SOVIET BORDER

In the Soviet worldview, the border was "more than a border", as it was perceived as a source of imminent danger and a space of violent confrontation with a hostile world. The border population fell into the trap of the border mystery, in which the premonition of the enemy turned sterile Soviet spaces into places of resistance and danger inhabited by the enemy population. The fact that the neighbouring countries were political opponents of the USSR legitimised the militarisation of border regions and fuelled the civil war atmosphere limitlessly. The most popular mythologems in the collective imagination of the Soviet people were those concerning three areas of political and ethnic confrontation: Bandera's Ukraine, Semenov's Transbaikalia[4] and Central Asia, with its omnipresent Basmachi bands. Despite the differences

4 Grigory Mikhailovich Semenov (b. 13 (26) September 1896, d. 30 August 1946) was a leader and a controversial symbol of the anti-communist Transbaikalian Cossack uprising. As a leader of a frontier quasi-state, he supported the project of the Great Mongolian State. After the collapse of the White

in time, place and culture, their dark legends served an important role as tools for border management. These stories acted as disciplinary narratives within the framework of frontier socialism. When discussing the traumatic experience of the spread of Soviet lifestyle models, these legends served as a way to experience cultural hierarchies, fears and a subconscious inner need for the tangible presence of an enemy, all at once. Culturally close and politically remote, outside and inside the country, dangerous and pitiful, strong and weak, these imagined non-communities did not disappear along with the USSR and its aggressive border regime. Soviet mythologems of frontier disloyalty continue to exist, adopting new forms and serving new functions in the post-Soviet situation.

The historical prototype of the imaginary non-community in Inner Asia was a part of the community of Transbaikal Cossacks, who supported White statehood in Transbaikalia and continued the struggle against the Soviet government until the end of World War II with varying intensity. The unique characteristics of the culture and the origins of the community are directly linked to the intricate racial systems established during the Russian colonisation of Siberia (Peshkov 2012). The Russian conquest of the Transbaikal region resulted in the development of new forms of ethnic and cultural identity based on the cultural syncretism and mestisation of the members of the analysed groups with the inhabitants of the region. These mixed communities are referred to as the "old settlers" (*starozhily*). These quasi-Indigenous communities need to keep the balance between Russian culture and the elements of their Indigenous one. This balance is maintained by their ability to integrate themselves into a narrative that is universally understood and that justifies their connection to their Indigenous culture and territory. The specificity of Transbaikalia was the overlapping quasi-Indigenous and Cossack statuses as regards most of the population. In that context, the hostile attitude of the Communist authorities towards the Cossacks (de-Cossackisation, dekulakisation, deportations and conscious provocations of malnutrition and famine in agricultural areas) and the new socialist border regime provoked destructive consequences for the everyday life of the local community. The fate of the Cossacks of eastern Transbaikalia is directly related to the border status of the territory. The role of the border management regime is key here: on the one hand, the community was created, together with the border to protect it, on the other hand, the change of the border regime after

movement, he was forced to abandon Siberia in September 1921. Soviet propaganda connected him to all forms of resistance against the Communists in Transbaikalia and Inner Mongolia. According to the Soviet model of political criminalization, first the followers of Ataman Semenov, and then the entire Transbaikal Cossacks began to be called Semenovites (Semenovtsy in Russian). It was an external term projected onto various communities related and unrelated to the Ataman. Later in the article, I will use the terms "semenovtsy" and "semenovite" as synonyms.

the victory of the Bolsheviks became the main factor in the destruction of Cossack Transbaikalia. The events of the civil war left the Transbaikal Cossack Army (ZKV) in a deep crisis. The community of Transbaikal Cossacks was a conglomerate of communities united by common models of socialisation and class identity, but extremely disunited by their origin, economic situation and even cultural base. Indigenous Cossacks (Buryats and Evenks) and descendants of exiled Poles, peasants forcibly enrolled as Cossacks and mestizos, creatively connecting different cultures – all this diversity determined the variety of reactions to the political crisis. Unlike traditional Cossack regions, the connection of Cossack communities with the peasantry is more complicated. The poorest part of the Cossacks practically feels like peasant communities, whereas many peasant communities in the region (for example, the Karyms in Transbaikalia) see themselves as descendants of pioneer Cossacks and are wary of "state Cossacks".

The revolution split the Transbaikal Cossack Army into two irreconcilable camps, turning representatives of the Cossack class in the region simultaneously into one of the most prominent groups in the construction of the nominally independent and socialist Far Eastern Republic (Sablin 2018) and a symbol of counter-revolution (Peshkov 2014). It was the "great Cossack catastrophe" that affected almost every family, which led not only to long-term bitterness but also rather effective ways of experiencing the history of the civil war in the region as the last and decisive battle of good against evil. After the victory of the Communists, a significant part of the Transbaikal Cossacks perceived the new government negatively. Relying on the Mongols of Russian and Chinese citizenship, Semenov overthrew the pro-Soviet government and, simultaneously, tried to implement two models of political power: a temporary military dictatorship with a declaration of a return to a republican form of government and a pan-Mongol theocratic state aimed at uniting all the Mongolian peoples of China and Russia (Vasilevsky 2007). After the defeat of White statehood in Transbaikalia, the most politically active segments of the emigration continued to fight against the Soviet government with varying support from the Chinese and Japanese military. In 1945, all areas with concentrated populations of emigration fell under Soviet control (Perminov 2008), after which the political activity of the Cossack emigration practically ceased. However, the defeat of the remnants of the Cossacks led to attempts to resurrect the community as a symbol of the danger threatening Soviet Transbaikalia and its residents from the outside world.

Semenov's rule has become the primary official trauma of Transbaikalia, with all regional memorial sites dedicated to honouring its victims. Both the real and fictional crimes of the Semenovites have become significant components of Soviet Transbaikal identity, fostering an image of a bloody orgy that continues to shape perceptions of the region's past. After Stalin's death, stories about the ataman and his followers

take on the character of a collective retro-hallucination about the presence in the region of a cross-border network of anti-communist resistance threatening every Soviet person. Soviet specialists in the Mongolian People's Republic, soldiers of the Transbaikal Military District and the Soviet contingent of the republic, migrants to Transbaikalia from other parts of the USSR and even KGB officers were so captured by the semi-official legend of the presence of Semenovites that they began to recognise Semenovites in marginal groups of Russian old-settlers from Inner Asia, weakly or not at all connected with the Cossacks of the rebellious ataman. It should be noted that this recognition, while undoubtedly a discriminatory practice, was still a form of symbolic exclusion, practically unsupported by the repressive apparatus of the Soviet state.

SEEING AS A BOLSHEVIK: ANATOMY OF A BORDER PHANTOM

If the change in narrative in Stalinism studies drew our attention to the practice of "speaking Bolshevik" (Kotkin 1997), then studies of myth creation in the borderlands show that an equally important skill of the Soviet person was the ability to see non-obvious things. This negative legend, a phantom or spectre, arose in the mid-50s at the junction of regional cultural policy, radical changes in the demography of the region and fears associated with the return of former Semenov residents from camps and exile. Initially, it covered newly arrived specialists, military personnel and prisoners, giving the act of staying in a remote province the features of a dangerous and educational adventure. Gradually, this mythologeme was transferred to Mongolia and China, where the presence of Russian refugees served as proof of the plausibility of the phantom.

The primary source of the soldiers' version of the myth were training units in Transbaikalia, from which soldiers were frequently transferred to Mongolia, contributing to the sense of realism and the global nature of the phenomenon. My respondents called Semenov omnipresent, showing the constant and all-encompassing presence of the legend in the soldiers' lives (Peshkov 2012). Myths about the existence of a culturally close but politically distant group living next to "normal Soviet people" in the border area often had no real basis at all but solved the internal problems of Soviet society. In the context of the Semenov legend, people in the late USSR began to think of alternative and less prestigious models of Russian culture that existed outside the USSR, as well as connections between ethnic and political solidarity. Being something of his own (representing a lost subculture), the mythical Semenovite, acting as a semi-criminal anti-Communist, was an absolute stranger. The issues of mestisation, anti-communism and the existence of islands untouched by the changes in Russian life were raised within the framework of this discourse

in the ideological context of absolute evil (Peshkov 2012). The real and fictional crimes of the Semenovites (largely constructed on the basis of the timeless legitimacy of socialist institutions) were presented as the legitimate cause of the "excesses" and anti-Cossack phobias of the Communists. The Semenov myth did not just unite everyone against a common enemy, a semi-real being, it created unity within regional and institutional conflicts – a Soviet specialist in both Mongolia and China; a resident of Lithuania or Latvia, forced to serve on the periphery of Transbaikalia; a convict remaining in a settlement in the region, his former guard dying of boredom in a remote zone; soldiers in their first and last years of service, united in relation to "people from the past" – as an insoluble conflict with them escalated or minimised real contradictions and conflicts. According to a unique discursive logic, the practice of forgetting entirely alters the context of events, portraying repression as a means of defending society against a stigmatised group.

The answer to the question of why they see something that does not exist refers to the logic of the border situation. Paradoxically, the opportunity to see islands of the non-Soviet in the sterile zone of the border areas was associated with a widespread perception of the border area as passable and partially uncontrolled. Its perception as a place where the state ceases to map social and political reality created the possibility of anticipating places not only remote from Soviet life, but also hostile to it. In this perspective, the border area is a network of Soviet and non-Soviet places controlled by different temporary regimes. It is only by symbolically losing control of an imaginary territory that one can see and feel the enemy everywhere. The virtual loss of control over the border area (the description of sterile areas in terms of imminent political danger) led to real efforts towards the endless securitisation of the areas. Here, the hostility of space merges with the projection of disloyalty among the border population: the danger of the anti-place becomes a reflection of the presence of enemies, which in turn can only be recognised thanks to the imaginary geography of the Soviet frontier. The spatial effects of fiction make it possible to imagine a cross-border zone as a place of eternal repetition. In addition, the inevitability of meeting with the enemy creates the imperative of a new development in the territory: the drama of a constant effort to turn the territory into a safe zone.

The power of this legend was so great that it touched the hearts of some of the "negatively recognised" communities. Soviet Transbaikalia, destroyed by the bloody fratricidal war, the deception, and the policy of sterilising borders, not only responded to the call to see the enemy on its territory but went further, recognising him in itself (Peshkov 2012). The reason for the deep resonance of this seemingly negative projection was the combination of the locality of the main antiheroes and the paradoxically Soviet interpretation of the image of Semenov: instead of a young Cossack trying to implement mutually exclusive projects, an image of a determined and ruthless leader comes to mind, ready to do anything to achieve his goals. In addition, Semenov

becomes a symbol of an act unthinkable for a Soviet person: bringing terror down on the heads of Communists. The evolution of the idea of an acceptable level of violence after the victory of the revolution is interesting. If, during the civil war, the terror of White statehood was presented to the local population as too radical and unacceptable a form of struggle, then after that, it is its very possibility that attracts attention and a desire for identification.

The compensatory function of the myth not only provided meaning to the catastrophe of Cossack Transbaikalia, but also portrayed it as a formidable event on a national level. The positive interpretation of the negative projection contrasted Soviet society with an active understanding of trauma as the outcome of a worthy defeat in an unequal struggle. From this perspective, everything was reversed: the fears of the enemy (Soviet society) regarding the declining power of their community enabled a calm acceptance of discriminatory practices. Now Soviet memorials, history lessons at school and even Soviet films about the civil war became a means of overcoming feelings of confusion and helplessness. Understanding this way of experiencing the past requires abandoning black-and-white oppositions: the main motive for Semenov's popularity was resentment at the portrayal of Red partisans in Transbaikalia. Soviet upbringing aided in the adoption of Soviet cultural memory models and elements of Cossack culture broadcast in the family made the position of victim impossible. The first factor (resentment) was the key here: in the "great Cossack catastrophe of Transbaikalia", the actual and perceived victories were divided. If nominally the victory of the Bolsheviks is not disputed by anyone, the battle for memory (even in the case of the children of the Red partisans) was undoubtedly won by the ataman and his formidable associates (Perminov 2008).

The community chooses the path of constant problematisation of the boundary between the past and the present, as well as the use of Soviet historical policy for its own purposes. Attention should be paid to the rather noticeable gender dimension of memory in Transbaikalia. If women's memory gradually politicises the private and local, then men's memory goes in the opposite direction, turning political confrontation into an element of the local landscape[5]. In male narratives, Semenov plays the main role: the very appearance of his name makes the absolute character of Soviet power relative. The main role in the transmission of memory is played by women: they create the conditions for the normalisation of the disaster and the restoration of communication with the vanished world. Women's stories circumvent confrontation but, at the same time, definitively legitimise participation in it as an "enemy".

5 Generalisation based on a series of unstructured interviews taken from residents of Transbaikalia in different years. These are mainly residents of the region born in rural areas during the 1935–1955 period. The respondents emphasised the role of family, relatives and the madness of the civil war as well as the exploits, danger and key role of the ataman in the very ability of the community to resist.

A typical story may be the words of the respondent, who said, "What were they [Cossacks] to do? Go to the Reds? Kill your own? Of course, not all the saints were there either, but everything the Communists say about them is not true. Simple, normal, ordinary guys. It was all their 'fault' that they couldn't see everything , that they were trying to defend themselves" (E.P., 84 years old, Chita, 01.08.2014).

By imposing the "women's perspective" on the dominant community and emphasising their own right to alternative memory, residents of Transbaikalia turned an insoluble conflict about ideologies into a tragedy of the personal, local and rooted. First of all, women emphasised the contrast between the happy, religious and Cossack Transbaikalia and its Soviet version, clearly devaluing the achievements of the Soviet government. By emphasising the strength of neighbourhood and family ties in the region through the shared experience of the war of all against all, in many ways, they negated the imperative of political solidarity, reducing political conflict to a struggle between fanaticism and normal life. The locality of the main character led to the appearance of numerous stories about friendship with the Semenov family, transforming images of the inhuman crimes of the Semenov people into a local drama inscribed in the system of kinship and friendship. Thus, one of my relatives told me in the late 80s, "Ataman Semenov's mother was a very good person. Everyone treated her well. Our family sold them groceries and we lived very amicably". In these stories, Semenov's cruel Cossacks become "our boys", drawn by external forces into a senseless conflict, but who have shown themselves to be dashing Cossacks. Instead of the watershed proposed by the state between the dark past and the increasingly bright present, in their stories the bright past was destroyed by the gloomy Soviet present. The confrontation itself in this context becomes just a transition into an empty time of destruction and decline:

> [Under the tsar] they lived well, with dignity. Then "they" came and began to take and rob. The guys were outraged and went to Semenov. And there was no place for ours here anymore. They just wanted order and a peaceful life. That's why they hate us so much. After all, nothing worked out for them [the Communists]. They can't do anything but kill. (T.S. 75 years old, Chita, 2.10.2014)

The lack of a recognised world for the losers is compensated for by the devaluation of the winners' world. This position turns the civil war into a battle between a local and a stranger, in which all participants make mistakes in their own way, but their mistakes are clearer and more excusable. Under Soviet conditions, this means disagreement over the disappearance of unburied enemies. They deny the authorities the right to leave their opponents unburied, returning their dignity and the right to make mistakes to the fallen: "Whatever they are, it's still ours… In this meat

grinder, everyone turned the handle. But where are their graves now? The Reds have monuments, flowers, and we have... It was blown away by the wind. It's not right, it's inhumane. Not a single grave was left" (T.P., 84 years old, Irkutsk, 09.08.2014).

By substituting the perspective of political conflict with the discourse of historical injustice, these practices dramatically change the image of repression. Despite the absence of direct political statements, this kind of memory largely undermined the foundations of the Soviet world order. Without using a political lexicon, the respondent directly interfered with the foundations of the Soviet world order. In a country where, after years of bloody war, not a single enemy cemetery remained, recalling the memory of the unburied was undoubtedly a political act. The strength of this model lies in its ability to be reproduced under any conditions. Unlike samizdat and dissident circles, it did not require courage and a break with Soviet life – it was enough to talk to one's own grandmother. Without directly affecting the world of ideology, this prospect decisively destroyed confidence in the foundations of the political order.

THE RETURN OF THE ANTIHEROES: LIMITED CITIZENSHIP FOR "SEMENOV'S FOLLOWERS"

The dangerous past of the border regions caught up with the communities of repatriated Cossacks and "local Russians" from Mongolia in an unexpected form of symbolic exclusion, almost unsupported by the repressive policy of the state. Both communities were not ready to understand, much less accept, the projected collective blame for the events of the civil war, representing typical refugee farming cultures. The lack of Soviet socialisation in the first case or basic stigmatisation in the second led to practices of self-preservation through family histories and the avoidance of political language. In both cases, communities try to get away from politics, constantly emphasising the difficult fate of refugees, love of work and loyalty to Russian culture. Their attempts to obtain Soviet citizenship ended in failure, and not just because of the doubts and fears of Soviet people when confronted by strangers. At first glance, the situation looked rather simple: the lack of a verifiable past and the general fear of people who left the USSR on their own led to exclusion and distrust. Most post-war repatriates faced similar problems to a greater or lesser extent, and their path to their homeland was not always strewn with roses. But not everything is as simple as it seems at first glance. From this perspective, the decision to repatriate, which causes distrust and alarm, is a convenient marker for the inclusion of local political folklore in the conflict between ethnic and political solidarity in Soviet society. The status of a repatriate greatly enhanced the power of the legend, including it in general fears towards people without a verifiable past.

In this context, official documents were not only a reservoir of personal archives useful to the state (containing information about people's ethnic and social origin, confessions, behaviour during the civil war and party debates, etc.), but also the potential basis of the new social identities created by it (that is, of an enemy, a prisoner, an exile, someone who had been forgiven, an enemy's child or a forgiven enemy's child). The lack of personal archives and socialisation in the USSR required creating a common archive for new citizens (by the Soviet state) and provoked hostile mythologisation of the groups in question (both political and racial), which resulted in the appearance of new "ex-émigré" communities showing selective or minimal adaptation to Soviet society. In this context, we can ask about the limits of power of Soviet citizenship and its entanglement in the wider context of the official and non-official conceptualisation of "ordinary Soviet people" as well as the complicated relations between external and internal state policy regarding Russians born outside the "motherland of the proletariat".

Citizenship is a concept with multiple dimensions and meanings depending on the basic features of a given society. As Jacqueline M. Miller (2002, 2) writes, "All manner of state policies can influence identity formation, but citizenship policy is crucial. Citizenship is the key delineator of the political community. It defines who enjoys the rights and undertakes the obligations of being a member of the state. It is also widely seen as an indicator of national community."

The relationship between the political and national communities was highly complicated in the USSR, since the state had dual status as an international political community of Communists[6] and an ethnopolitical structure that gave special status to Russians (Vishnevsky 1998). From the international perspective, the USSR enjoyed its status as the successor to the Russian Empire, selectively and arbitrarily continuing its obligations to former Russian citizens. The key feature of socialist modernisation was the routine use of violence, both as a tool to eliminate the existing sociocultural structures and as a basic mechanism of social regulation. The core of this policy was the use of the personal archives of citizens in the mass production of "public enemies" and strong ethnic and social segregation between Soviet citizens. The processes of state intervention in family life and the nuclearisation of families among urban Russians also played a crucial role (Vishnevsky 1998). The resistance to state family control and the preservation of traditional family values were perceived by the Soviet Russians as oriental (backward) cultural features. That cultural transition created the possibility of perceiving non-Soviet village communities as examples of backward and half-oriental subcultures.

The internalisation of Soviet propaganda and the development of useful habits of self-discipline provoked radical changes in the norms of Soviet personhood

6 The term "the USSR" did not contain geographical and ethnic designates.

and standards of normality in social life (Fitzpatrick 1976). The consequences included strong barriers to taking in new citizens born outside the USSR, stemming from the special role that official personal archives played in the designation process of the candidates' social status and their opportunities concerning social mobility. The key role of private history stemmed from the state's heightened focus on people's social records (the social status of their parents), their ethnic records (their origin) and their biographical records (their behaviour and political attitude) as a basis for verification and stratification. The "lowborn" or those having "poor biographies" were automatically separated from others and their rights were limited (Vishnevsky 1998). Personal archives also reflected the conflict regarding the conceptualisation of movement in Soviet society (both official and unofficial). Unofficial contact with hostile state regimes (emigration, living in pre-socialist territories, living in occupied territories) constituted a strong barrier to social mobility and full-rights status in Soviet society (Ablazhej 2007). In 1989 an elderly lady in Irkutsk told me, "I cannot be a member of the Communist Party, because I spent my childhood in the occupied territories."

Under conditions of mass paranoia, the attitude towards official (Humphrey 2002) and unofficial personal archives (based on people's unofficial living beyond the USSR) was extremely distrustful not only from the perspective of the state but also ordinary Soviet citizens. In that context, a conflict could be observed between the internalised official norms and the subjective personal narratives of ex-emigrants (not legitimised by the state) about the non-Soviet parts of their biographies. In the case of Russia, the transition of decisions concerning truth from the private level to the level of institutions of the socialist state provoked radical changes in ethnic solidarity (the politicisation of the ethnic sphere) and perception of Russian diaspora as "ours" in the cultural sense, but "strange" in the political sense. Therefore, the ethnically based transition from diaspora members into Soviet citizens could be carried out in the form of "negative inclusion" with temporary limitations regarding their rights and their status as "ex-enemies".

The lack of people's personal archives and their socialisation in the USSR required making a common archive for new citizens and provoked hostile mythologisation of new society members viewed as ex-bandits, collaborators, spies, etc. From that perspective, the Soviet passport-granting practices were only the first step on the long road to one's being included in Soviet society. It was not a matter of a conflict between the external and internal policies of the USSR, or between the state policy of ethnic solidarity and the state policy revealing the lack of confidence. It was, in fact, a logical system that gradually created citizens by means of the official interpretation of their personal histories and the translation of their outer biographies into Soviet categories. Their passport records (regarding place of birth) were the state legitimisation of official and unofficial exclusion practices regarding new citizens.

From an anthropological perspective, real citizenship status was based not only on the official decision (granting a passport and the official interpretation of one's personal archive) but mostly on the subjective mass imagination concerning categories of one's being "like us" or "like them". Soviet mass imagination and collective memory were based on state propaganda, but they adapted ideological patterns to their own needs. Radical changes in the official canon of history and the perception of the external world resulted in the inertia and disparity of some patterns and the diversity of Soviet identities (Humphrey 2002). From the perspective of Soviet people, a White émigré symbolised the old order and was stained by his or her collaboration with Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire. Immigration symbolised the right for people's free mobility, without state control, and the right to defend family life. That interpretation of movement and family rights was very strange to the isolated Soviet society, with a blurred line between family and social lives. In that situation, the alternative "Russianness" provoked aggression and attempts to disqualify it as politically hostile. There was a conflict between two models of "Russianness" (Soviet and non-Soviet), between two models of privacy, between two models of movement rights, between two ways of evaluating the past and tradition. The clear advantage of the Soviet version changed the potential dialogue into a hostile monologue and transformed the "alternative Russianness" into a special feature characteristic of backward and antagonistic communities.

The specificity of the "political" in the USSR resulting from the overmilitarisation of social life (Scocpol 1988, Alexandrov 1999) broadened the boundaries of political action to an extreme extent. In that context, political vocabulary referred to ethnic and racial debates and the evaluation of people's cultural status. The lack of possibility for friendly inclusion provoked complex exclusion discourses combining political, social and – when possible – cultural differences (orientalisation in Said's sense). In the case of Transbaikalia, the discourse about the "descendants of the wild Ataman Semenov's Cossacks" (the *Semenovtsy*) living in the Soviet, Chinese and Mongolian border territory was a typical example of a complex exclusion stereotype combining aspects which were political (bandits), social (Cossacks as archaic village people) and racial (Mestizo communities).

The quasi-Indigenous groups were destroyed both in Mongolia and China. Emigration lost its status and mixed marriages provoked the appearance of two new ex-old-settler communities: the local Russians in Mongolia and the Three River Delta Russians in China. Those communities differed from Russian immigrants in Inner Asia (i.e., the what are known as Manchurian Russians) with their village attachment, the local character of migration movements, the cultural background of the old settlers and their incorrect identification as "Ataman Semenov's wild Cossacks". This situation provoked the negative politicisation of the groups and the tendency to

perceive both the Soviet state and the citizens statically. The two groups being analysed had different historical experiences and paths to socialisation as Soviet citizens. The Three River Delta Russians experienced a time of cultural and economic domination where they lived (Lindgren 1938), along with the genocidal policy of Soviet military troops and strong repressions after their "liberation" in 1945. In their case, they lived in integrated settlements of immigrants with their own models of self-organisation. Under Japanese occupation (1932–1945) the community was subject to a special passport policy aimed at coercive citizenship granted by Manchukuo. The majority consisted of citizens hostile to the USSR, and they realised all the consequences of that situation: serving in the Kwantung Army and participating in public and cultural life. The community in question was also the object of strong anti-communist propaganda. In the USSR, where millions of people were jailed for simply telling a silly joke, that experience looked dangerous. The Sovietisation policy and access to citizenship did not guarantee political and cultural rehabilitation in the USSR. Members of these groups were treated by the state with a hostile distance. Those who returned to the USSR before 1953 (Stalin's death) were sent to prison or exile, whereas after de-Stalinisation, they were forced to settle in Northern Kazakhstan. We can observe that the model of citizen recruitment was very similar to the Soviet policy towards the Russians in Eastern Europe and the Balkans: there was a warm invitation to return and a difficult start in the new society. It was called "the way of repentance".

The lack of verifiable private history and basic social habits (the lack of verbal discipline, another point of view, the experience of an economy without starvation, etc.) resulted in the treatment of the groups as hostile and, thus, in need of earning the right to return through hard work or imprisonment (Perminov 2008). The official common archives of the groups became a substitute for personal history and differentiated the groups from others. That model of negative inclusion created a new group of citizens displaying selective socialisation and adaptation to Soviet culture. Political terms were eliminated from the groups' vocabulary and thinking. Faith, the old model of family life and a strong social network remained. Thus, the community had some autonomy concerning the circumstances of how the way-of-repentance model of citizenship was used. Regardless of the parallels between private and common archives (collaboration with Japanese military forces, participation in the Cossack resistance, etc.), the group did not accept the Soviet version of reality and avoided the names and terms used by the propaganda (Semenov). Soviet propaganda and the collective imagination of the Soviet people artificially politicised the group, perceiving them as anti-communists and enemies of Soviet society. One of my respondents recalled this as follows:

> After returning, we were considered enemies, the White Guard. The events of the civil war were far from us – we just wanted to return to our homeland and work, but the motherland kept reminding us about the sins of our fathers. Needless to say, Soviet stories about the civil war had nothing to do with the memories of our elders. We were chosen as enemies, whether we wanted to be or not. (O.P., 65 years old, Priargunsk, 09.08.2014)

In the case of the People's Republic of Mongolia (PRM), the situation differed significantly. Most of the local Russians in Mongolia found themselves in the country because of the 1928 famine, which was not related to Cossack immigration. After 1971, those people had Soviet passports (with no right to live in the USSR) and generally a Soviet identity (Mihalev 2008). The imagination of the Soviet people resulted in the group being viewed as the mythical Semenovtsy who had escaped to hide in Mongolia. The local Russians did not understand the significance of the name and started using it as a proper name. Before 1945 the community of refugees from the USSR in Mongolia were a small group of stateless people (*apatrides*), and the Mongolian authorities had no interest in their situation. The second wave of Mongolian Sovietisation after 1945 complicated the lives of the country's local Russians. The Russification of city life and the massive presence of Soviet specialists provoked questions about the group's status and identity. Based on the non-political (economic) causes of their immigration as well as their participation in WWII, the group expected acceptance from the Soviet state and counted on its slow adaptation to Soviet society. That never happened. The Soviet colonial institution in Mongolia used a mixed policy of preventive segregation and partial inclusion: on the one hand, KGB units warned Soviet specialists about the hostility of Ataman Semenov's wild Cossacks, on the other hand, members of the community were included in basic Soviet institutions in Mongolia (Soviet schools, kindergartens, special shops, etc.). The fantasies (enhanced by propaganda) of Soviet people identified those groups with the Semenovtsy based on the mythology connected with their real and fictional features: mestisation, physical aggression and bilingualism. This combination of the term (Semenovtsy) and selective elements of the Soviet stereotype was sufficient proof of their hostility. Based on the memories of local Russians and Soviet specialists, it can be postulated that the Soviet specialists never stopped thinking about the local Russians in terms of the Semenov myth.

The discriminatory discourse concerned primarily men: women appeared in memories only as potential sexual objects – they never had names and were only described as the "Semenov girls" (*Semenovki*). Men, in turn, were depicted as aggressive villagers or aggressive boys attacking "Soviet children" at school. The nature of the conflict lay in the connection of the "norms" and the "stereotype": ordinary Soviet people were

confronted with Semenovtsy, regular Russians with people of mixed origin, educated people with villagers. What caused the hostility? The Soviet contingent in Mongolia consisted of men of different ethnic origins. The USSR was a post-agrarian country (Sinyavsky 2003), and physical violence in the peripheral parts of the USSR was a routine way of communication. In the set of behavioural features attributed to local Russians (Stepanova 2008), there was nothing unfamiliar to Soviet people (excluding their strong Mongolian skills). Mongolia was an ideal territory for integration into society – it was isolated, dominated by Russians and had years of documented personal histories. Nonetheless, the Soviet community continued its policy of rejection. The reasons for its hostility stemmed from its altogether different conceptualisation of the right of mobility, from the confrontation between the Soviet community and informal networks of relatives and friends, as well as from political neutrality viewed as a political manifestation (hence the accusation of a non-Soviet lifestyle). We are dealing with the creation of a community as the antipodes of Soviet society and an instrument for introducing discipline. Thus, a regular relationship with the community was impossible. The granting of citizenship in the USSR in 1971 was an interesting demonstration of creating a Soviet citizen from a pariah. What is interesting, is that the date has not appeared as a turning point in the memories of either the local Russians or the Soviets. They never noticed the change.

The discourse concerning the wild Semenovtsy was supposed to mask the repressions against non-Soviet and Asian models of Russianness. It was not based on facts at all. Paradoxically, the groups connected with the Cossack resistance were “forgiven”, but the local Russians, who were never connected with them, remained stigmatised until the collapse of the USSR. The tragedy of the latter lay in the fact that in colonial Mongolia, their role could not change – their political rejection automatically combined with the social and racial one. There were examples of whole nations being persecuted in the history of the USSR. Those local Russians, however, exemplify a group created intentionally for persecution. Even today, the Russian community in Ulaanbaatar is divided into ex-Soviets and local Russians. In the case of the latter, the temptation to use the community’s shared archive to build its identity was so strong that it practically prevented its members from becoming citizens.

The consequences of the policy towards the communities in question need to be analysed, taking into account their reactions and adaptation strategies. We are dealing with the sudden introduction of peasant communities into a generally hostile social reality as well as their separation from ordinary citizens. The groups being analysed had to conform both to their stigmatisation and their inability to adapt their version of history to the official one (shared by everyone else). That situation caused considerable correction in their collective memory and the selective Sovietisation of some private versions of events. A list of terms, names and ideas necessary in their

previous life were eliminated. Instead, they resorted to complaining about their harsh treatment and rejection. The members of the groups being analysed became Soviet people – insofar as it was possible under the given conditions. They approved of socialism, underlined the absurdity of the civil war and avoided dangerous memories. The two communities reacted to the political disciplinary discourse and to their rejection by other Soviet citizens in different ways. The Three River Delta Russians stressed the fact that they were hard-working, and they became closed and religious. The local Russians in Mongolia, in turn, became aggressive towards Soviet citizens and developed their agricultural resourcefulness, which led to profiteering in food and other fields. Their aggression towards the Soviet specialists was a desperate reaction to the constant persecution of the group, as well as its rejection by the PRM. Thus, as a result of propaganda, new groups of negative identities appeared (the Semenovtsy) based on the propaganda itself and had nothing in common with the civil war heroes. That new, subjective Semenov-style subculture resulted from the reaction of the Transbaikal old settlers to their marginalisation and to the attitude of the Soviets towards de-Cossackisation. In that context, passports granted to non-Soviets played a role in transforming the analysed groups into local Soviet subcultures more comprehensible to society, and the Three-River-Delta Russians almost became the "forgiven".

The reasons why those discrimination practices have been so popular until now (after the collapse of the USSR) stem from the hidden aspects of the conflict between Soviet society and the analysed communities: that is, the right of the latter to live outside the USSR, their autonomous family life and their right to interpret their own cultural tradition. The most important of these, however, was their ability to enter Soviet society without credible personal archives. In the case of Eastern European and (urban) Manchurian Russian immigration, the period of stigmatisation ended fairly quickly, unlike in the case of Mongolia. The examples analysed show that entering society through a negative legend created by the state brought a danger that the group would be treated instrumentally by both the state (for disciplinary purposes) and by the other citizens (focussed on their exotic enemies). The tragedy of the analysed groups lies in the fact that their conceptualisation by Soviet society was based on a legend that was crucial to the identity of the region. The legend metaphorically described the reasons for the Cossacks' physical extermination – it made the victims guilty and confirmed the ethnosocial modernity obtained after the cleansing. The negative legend created by the state and society turned out to be stronger here, not only due to their Soviet passports but also the general mechanisms of introducing new citizens into society through "penance".

AFTER THE USSR: WHAT REMAINS IN THE END

The disappearance of the USSR and the closure of the border management regime did not mean the victory of the Semenov myth. After a short euphoria of trying to replace Soviet heroes with non-Soviet ones, the realisation came that it was impossible to continue the mystery. The counter-memory turned out to be "anti-communist in form, but socialist in content": it transferred Semenov-based Soviet fantasies about the right to violence, about the border area as a space of the impossible (and about the right of "our government" to implement preventive repression). The new situation however has brought new questions. Without denying respondents the right to experience complex forms of temporality and deep involvement in historical events (Maynes 2008), there are no clear criteria for a real "Semenovtsy". Who now are the fantasy characters constantly present in the practices of memory and counter-memory? Are they the real followers of Semenov; the descendants of Cossack emigration, who retain (or, for the most part, do not retain) a connection with the views of their parents; repatriates and emigrants, forcibly conscripted by the Japanese into the Cossack units of colonel I. A. Peshkov and the "Asano" detachment; or the Transbaikal people, who perceive the Soviet myth as the "enduring glory of their ancestors"? It can be assumed that, in the crooked mirror of the Semenov myth, the late Soviet border community saw itself: its fear of border territories, hope for the existence of a political alternative, its longing for revolutionary romanticism and the unification of everyone against a common enemy. No less Soviet was the counter-memory, more associated with the trauma of de-Cossackisation than with the civil war. It transferred on the Semenov-based Soviet imaginations about the right for violence, about the border territory as a space of the impossible (networks of Cossack resistance going beyond the cordon) and about the right of "our government" to carry out preventive repression.

From the point of view of local residents, the gradual disappearance of the Semenovites resembled the dramatic moment at midnight in Cinderella: a powerful enemy dissolved or turned into an ordinary people associated with the region, differing only in greater religiosity and their attitude towards peasant labour. The imaginary geography of the legend dissolved along with the enemy. The proximity of Russian China made it possible to verify the virtual nature of the White Guard nest (Basharov 2010), and the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the mass emigration of local Russians from Mongolia ended the "Semenov epic" in that country. Moreover, the Transbaikal villages resembled the Cossack Vendee least of all. For obvious reasons, the alternative past of eastern Transbaikalia did not have its own material representations, being, first of all, a reflection of frontier mythologies. Paradoxically, it is precisely the stoppage of Soviet cultural policy that makes the Sovietisation of the cultural field of the region absolute: the phantom threat of Cossack resistance

could not exist outside the peculiar temporality of the Soviet border regime. The former Soviet Transbaikalia, rapidly turning from a bastion of the Soviet state into a peripheral and poor region, for obvious reasons turned out to be unprepared for the conversion of demons into angels, preserving Soviet mythologems as the basis of the region's identity (Humphrey 2002).

In addition, the transformation of Soviet mythologies from official to private in many ways breaks the accepted models of opposition between local and external. From this point of view, the Soviet and its regional alternative are connected by a common gap with the present time. Only the intensification of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, or modest attempts at spontaneous re-Stalinisation, revive the phantom – both in the form of an external memory of the search for Semenovites in the region and, internally, by glorifying the catastrophe of Cossack Transbaikalia.

The new historical dilemmas of the inhabitants of the Transbaikal province are illustrated in a display in the Museum of Local Lore of Priargunsk. Materials related to the first half of the 20th century are placed according to the confrontation on opposite walls. The visual culmination of this dual order of regional history is the placement of portraits of Stalin and Semenov in binary opposition. History becomes a game of political will and the capacity for violence. It should be noted that the provincial museum breaks from the traditional model of presenting the victims of a totalitarian state as defenceless martyrs of a ruthless state machine. Russian society places the Soviet state and the resistance to power on different moral planes, and attempts to combine them are highly questionable. In the case of Priargunsk, the political mythology of the Soviet state is visually contrasted with the political mythology of White Transbaikalia. In the mass consciousness of the region, both Stalin and Semenov symbolise the will of power and the ruthless extermination of opponents for the sake of a higher goal. In both cases, the imaginary state correlates with a state of emergency: now Semenov becomes a reflection of Stalin – being able to foresee the crimes of the Communists, he punishes future criminals ruthlessly and with foresight. Here we meet with the complete Sovietisation of anti-Soviet memory, and its inseparability from the Soviet history of the region. The two political alternatives are separated exclusively by the point of localisation – Soviet Transbaikalia did not recognise the rebellious chieftain of its heroes in the Cossacks. The predators of the frontier, who break the martyrological canon of Russian culture, arouse respect and fear, but they do not cease to be complete strangers.

The Semenovsky myth becomes part of the nostalgia for a vanished country, no longer a Cossack one, but a Soviet Transbaikalia. Army folklore, historical novels (Povolyaev 2003), permitted memories of the White Guard and interventionists do not allow this story to disappear, but also deprive it of messianic pathos. After the collapse of the USSR, this part of the collective "experience" was legitimised by the memory infrastructure on the internet and historical journalism.

Under the new conditions, the memory of the tragic events of the Russian Civil War is created within the framework of asymmetric reconciliation, where the key issue remains the attitude towards the USSR. Before our eyes, a mechanism is actually being created for the return and legitimisation of the Soviet past as an integral imperial project and victory over the radical left madness of the revolution and the civil war. This explains the shift of public attention from Lenin to Stalin, as well as the simultaneous glorification of the White and Red armies. It should be noted that this form of justification is very deceptive, since instead of reconciliation, it offers increased confrontation. Introducing the concept of the only possible choice, it outlines most of the biographies of the inhabitants of the region as traitors and collaborators. If we admit that the USSR was a slightly exotic form of the Russian Empire, then the enemies of the Soviet imperial project become the enemies of Russia. In contrast to the collective guilt of phantom disloyalty, the new perspective not only creates the appearance of the individualisation of responsibility, but also new forms of disloyalty subordinated to the imperial reading of Soviet history. This means preserving the memory of memory without changing the established assessments of the civil war.

CONCLUSION

The complex temporality (Radu 2010) of the Soviet worldview made the past an arena of political struggle and sharply politicised seemingly neutral reactions: avoidance, silence, misunderstanding or fatigue from the turbulent history of the border areas. In this context, guests from abroad immediately became guests from the past, increasing fears in general as well as those about the credulity of the Soviet state. Unlike the Stalinist period (Scott 2009), when panics and fears were a strictly planned show of loyalty, here we are dealing with a grassroots initiative, only partially, and with great reservations, supported by the state apparatus. In this context, the need for the existence of an enemy can take forms far from the expectations of the state and continues to be the main obstacle to the adoption of political alternatives.

Using the experience of repatriates from Inner Asia as an example, this article examines the specifics of Soviet practices of suspicion, fixing the border population within a framework of inevitable political and racial impurity. The communities captured by this phantom are not able to form any opposition to the language of accusation: they either do not understand the essence of the issue, or they do not know how to speak the language of the Soviet memory. At the same time, all sides of this complex conversation rather clearly perceive the causes of why anti-communist resistance resonates in Transbaikalia. This is the breaking of the martyrological consensus (and the tacit prohibition of armed resistance) over the memory of the right to own

political order, with its own ethics and legal norms. This is a conflict between the local and the general, wherein negative characters are mastered and their actions are not subject to general (official) ethics. We are dealing with an imaginary state order capable of creating its own ethical regimes and imperatives of protection. The transformation of the memory of civil war events into a phantom led to the erosion of ethical responsibility and the localization of resistance in the Transbaikalia region and its border population (Buryats, Evenks and Mestizos).

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AT THE CROSSROADS OF MEMORIES: STATE, REGIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE RUSSIAN-CAUCASIAN WAR AMONG CIRCASSIANS IN ADYGEA

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The traumatic experience of war has played a pivotal role in the history of the Circassians, an Indigenous people of the North Caucasus who suffered enormous population loss and displacement due to the Russian Empire's conquest in the nineteenth century. Despite this historical trauma, not all members of the Circassian community oppose modern Russian military expansion in Ukraine driven by colonial ambition. To understand why this is the case, the article examines the contestation between the state memory regimes that have been silencing the memory of the Russian-Caucasian War (1763–1864) and the counter-memory of the Circassians who preserve the memory of its atrocities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it shows how Circassian authorities and individuals adapt to the current regime, which discourages ruminations on the significance of the Russian-Caucasian War while elevating the memory of the Second World War and emphasising the importance of interethnic unity. The paper argues that by establishing and sustaining a hierarchy of memories and identities, the Russian state cultivates loyalty and patriotism among its ethnic minorities, who are compelled to prioritise their identity as Russian citizens over their ethnic affiliations and grievances.

KEYWORDS: Circassians, Russian-Caucasian War, memory, Russia, North Caucasus

INTRODUCTION

In April 2022, a renowned filmmaker of Circassian descent condemned in his Instagram post[1] Russia's atrocities against civilians in Ukrainian Bucha, imploring Russian

1 The author began the post by expressing concerns about the safety of his family members who still lived in Russia and received threats because of his anti-war stance. Shortly afterward, he deleted

citizens to earnestly reflect on the ongoing aggression launched by their country. He finished his emotional post in the following way:

> I would like to address separately the residents of the North Caucasus, in particular, the Circassians […] who support this nightmare. We all know and honour the date 21 May 1864. For most of us, this is a great tragedy. As a result of the war, Russia made us its colony, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians. Do you really not see any parallels between the genocide of the Circassian people and what is happening in Ukraine now? (April 2022, archived Instagram post, translation mine)

The date 21 May 1864, referred to by the author, marks the last day of the Russian-Caucasian War (1763-1864[2]), which had devastating consequences for multiple Indigenous communities, particularly the Circassians, who fiercely resisted the encroachment into their territories. Realising they would not submit to the empire, Russian officials decided to "cleanse" the Black Sea coast of this "harmful" and "undesirable" population (Holquist 2001). Terror, including torching villages and massacring civilians, was used as an instrument to drive them from their lands. The survivors had to either resettle in the territories designated for them by the Russian authorities or relocate to the Ottoman Empire. The majority opted for the latter, and an estimated 500,000 to one million Circassians departed for the Ottoman Empire by sea, with at least tens of thousands drowning or succumbing to hunger and disease along the way (Perovic 2018, 58).

Unsurprisingly, the Russian-Caucasian War still plays a pivotal role for the Circassians, scattered between their North Caucasus homeland and diasporas around the world. Their shared tragic history has become an important part of the identity of many modern Circassians (King 2007) and has been used as a tool for advancing nationalist assertions (Catic 2015; Zhemukhov 2012). Circassian activists have appealed to the Kremlin to recognise the nineteenth-century Circassian genocide by the Russian Empire, but their pleas remain unanswered. The unwillingness of the Russian state to accept an uncomfortable interpretation of these events creates intractable tensions that, as of this date, surround the so-called "Circassian question".

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the post, which I had archived, presumably due to pressure placed on his family. Therefore, to protect the author's anonymity, I have refrained from mentioning his name.

2 There is a discrepancy between the periodisation and the naming of the war in Russian and Circassian historiographies. In the former, it is referred to as "the Caucasus War" (1817–1864), while the latter calls it "the Russian-Caucasian" or "the Russian-Circassian War" and uses a broader timeframe of 1763–1864. See Zhemukhov (2012) for a discussion.

Notably, as the cited post suggests, not all Circassians draw connections between Russia's historical and modern military colonial aggressions. This is evident in the wide range of reactions that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has evoked among the Circassians. It has deeply resonated with activists in the diasporas, sparking renewed efforts to draw international attention to the plight of their ancestors. In 2022, a US-based Circassian journalist Fatima Tlis addressed the European Parliament, making direct comparisons between Russia's annexation of the North Caucasus and its invasion of Ukraine. In 2023, Adel Bashqawi, a Jordan-born Circassian author, released a book with the telling title, *Circassia and Ukraine: Two Nations Even Russian Genocide Can't Destroy*. Some of those in the homeland (e.g., civic activist Ibrahim Yaganov) also pointed to parallels between their tragic history and the Russian offensive in Ukraine, urging Circassians not to participate in the war on the Russian side. These voices were quickly silenced as the Russian government increased its crackdown on anti-war dissent. In the meantime, Circassian authorities, local official media, some educational institutions and civic organisations in the national republics where the Circassians reside (Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai- Cherkessia) have demonstrated strong support for what Russia terms a "special military operation" to "denazify" Ukraine[3].

Responding to the questions posed by this special issue, the paper ethnographically explores how the modern Circassians talk about their historical trauma and what factors might make the Russian war against Ukraine comprehensible to them given their history. The focus is on Adygea, the second smallest national republic in the Russian Federation, with a population of almost 440,000 people[4] and Circassians greatly outnumbered by Russians (22% vs 61%). Compared to Kabardino-Balkaria, where they make up the majority of the population (57%), the Circassians in Adygea rarely express dissent vocally or visibly against federal policies and decisions, including those that concern their collective memory. Perhaps because of its size and non-remonstrative stance, the way the "Circassian question" is dealt with in this republic has so far received scant scholarly attention in English. The current paper addresses this gap, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how past and present Russian wartime conflicts are perceived by ethnic minorities in Russia. It demonstrates that by creating a hierarchy of identities and memories, the state ensures its ethnic minorities, including those who have reason to harbour resentment towards Russian authorities, perceive themselves as loyal citizens, who prioritise their civic identity over ethnic belonging and painful memories.

3 For instance, see GTRK Adygeia (2022). This news report depicts youth in Maykop, Adygea, showing their support for the "special military operation" in Ukraine by holding Russian flags and forming the letter "Z", a symbol of the Russian invasion

4 Statistical data in this and the following sentence is taken from the 2010 All-Russia Population Census.

The modern map of the North Caucasus. Adapted from https://wikitravel.org/shared/File:Caucasus_regions_map.png]

Data used in this article were collected as part of an extensive ethnographic project that explored the language maintenance practices of Circassians in Adygea. Data collection, including interviews, questionnaires, social media posts, school observations and archival work, was conducted in the summer of 2019 and between August 2020 and June 2021 (see Minakova 2023 for a detailed description of the collection). Although the research questions did not directly concern the Russian-Caucasian War, the subject surfaced in about one-third of the gathered data. Realising that this theme is highly relevant to the community, I added a corresponding tag while coding my data. For this article, I conducted a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) and an interactional and cultural analysis (Schrauf 2016) of this data, selecting several interview excerpts to illustrate my observations regarding how the participants talked about their traumatic past.

In order to understand how Circassians today engage in discussions about the Russian-Caucasian War, the article begins with an overview of how this conflict has been presented within the memory regimes of the USSR and Russia. I then examine how modern authorities in Adygea navigate between paying tribute to their ancestors – murdered or deported in the course of the Russian-Caucasian War – and aligning with the present federal agenda, which stresses the importance of harmonising interethnic relationships (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of December 19, 2012) and forging a sense of unity among the peoples of Russia. Finally, I provide a close analysis of two individual interviews where participants extensively reflect on the historical trauma of the Circassians, shifting between discussion of past events and their reverberations in the present. The concluding section argues that exploring identities fostered by the state through the state-driven politics of memory can aid in understanding the different attitudes of Russia's ethnic minorities to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

DEALING WITH A DARK PAST: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE RUSSIAN-CAUCASIAN WAR AND CIRCASSIAN ETHNIC CLEANSING IN THE SOVIET AND RUSSIAN REGIMES OF MEMORY

The article proposes treating the atrocities committed against the Circassians by the Russian Empire as one of the country's "dark pasts". Dixon (2018, 19) defines the term as "large-scale or systematic human rights atrocities" such as "genocide, mass killing, ethnic cleansing, colonialism, and slavery […], for which the state bears some responsibility, either directly or as a successor to the regime that perpetrated the crimes". Since acknowledging dark pasts poses various risks, including threats to the country's positive self-image, silencing claims of wrongdoings is common for states that rely on a sanitised past to solidify the nation in the present. By establishing "official memory regimes", that is, state-controlled mechanisms for shaping historical recollection (Bernhard and Kubik 2014), such countries, of which modern Russia is an illustrative example, strategically highlight events instrumental in creating a sense of unified national identity while marginalising or suppressing dark pasts that can undermine this goal.

Dixon (2018) stresses that the relationship between a country and its dark past is dynamic and multidirectional. An official memory regime is frequently challenged by "counter-memories" that promote divergent commemorative narratives, "representing the views of marginalized individuals or groups within the society" (Zerubavel 1995, 11). Regime changes typically entail "the reformulation of collective identities", which cannot occur without re-evaluating a country's past (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 8). At these turning points, dark pasts might re-emerge at

the demand of oppressed groups or be repurposed by the state to reach new political goals. As the rest of this section demonstrates, the Russian/Soviet state interpretations of the Russian-Caucasian War have undergone significant changes, from glorifying the resistance of the mountaineers to denying the very fact that the Russian-Caucasian War ever happened. Radical political transformations after 1917 and in the 1990s did shed light on historical injustices against the Circassians, but subsequent political retrenchments stifled their efforts to openly discuss their past.

In the early Soviet Union, when the Bolsheviks sought to gain the trust of ethnic minorities by promoting non-Russian nationalism and denouncing tsarist oppression, the Russian advancements into the North Caucasus were condemned as colonial expansion. The resistance of the North Caucasus peoples, particularly the Circassians, was praised as a heroic "struggle for freedom" and "independence from alien Russians" (Siukhov 1926, 2). In the mid-1930s, however, Stalin proclaimed that "non-Russian mistrust had been overcome" and introduced the concept of "the Friendship of the Peoples" of the USSR (Martin 2001, 451). Consequently, the role of the Russian people, their history and culture was elevated, while the importance of ethnic minorities receded into the background. Within this context, the resistance of the mountaineers was officially labelled "reactionary", "nationalist" and serving the interests of "English capitalism and the Turkish Sultan" who aimed to spread anti-Russian sentiments in the Caucasus (Adamov and Kutakov 1950). This dramatic change in the master narrative was "a crushing blow to the North Caucasians" since it harmed the development of their cultures and resulted in the repression of scholars studying the Russian-Caucasian War through an anticolonial lens (Karcha 1958, 115-116).

Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, the official discourse put greater emphasis on "unity", centuries-old "brotherly friendship" and "rapprochement" between the peoples of the USSR. Since the atrocities of the Russian-Caucasus War did not fit this narrative, Soviet officials, aided by historians, invented a myth about the "voluntary joining" of the peoples of the North Caucasus to Russia, ignoring or denying the occurrence of the Russian-Caucasian War (see Polovinkina 2001; Shnilerman 2006). In 1957, the republics of Adygea, Kabardino-Balakariia and Karachai-Cherkessia celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of this "voluntary joining". The year 1557 was selected as the starting point of this "friendship" since in the mid-sixteenth century several Circassian princes formed a temporary alliance with Muscovy to fight against Crimean Tatars. This fact assisted in building a "politically correct" image of the past, reinforcing the narrative of a long and peaceful coexistence between the Russians and the Circassians.

During *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the 1980s, the myth of "voluntary joining" was debunked, and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed the North Caucasian

peoples to challenge the official memory regime with their counter-memory. For example, local authorities and intelligentsia in Adygea openly criticised the silencing of historical facts about the Russian-Caucasian War and explored ways to deal with and talk about their past trauma. In the meantime, Circassian scholars uncovered and published archival materials revealing details about the deportation of the Circassians (e.g., Kumykov 1994). The discourse soon led to concrete actions: in 1992 and 1996, respectively, the authorities in Kabardino-Bakaria and Adygea officially recognised the Circassian genocide. Furthermore, in 2005, an appeal, albeit unsuccessful, was made to the Russian federal authorities to acknowledge the genocide against the Circassians (see Zhemukhov, 2012).

The 1990s witnessed a sharp rise in ethnic and territorial tensions in the North Caucasus. In response, the first president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, issued a statement, acknowledging the severe losses sustained by North Caucasians in the nineteenth century. Yeltsin (1994) described the war as "the courageous struggle of the peoples of the Caucasus not only for survival on their native land but also for the preservation of their unique culture and the best traits of their national character" (translation mine). The statement might have seemed like an important step towards bridging the official and counter-memory of the Circassians. Yet, as highlighted by Urushadze (2018), Yeltsin's address should be understood within the context of the imminent First Chechen War (1994–1996) as an attempt to appease and contain separatist movements in the Caucasus. The 1994 statement underscored that the memory of the Russian-Caucasian War should serve as a "warning against new tragedies" and proclaimed the North Caucasus an inseparable part of Russia.

After a period of nascent democracy in the 1990s, Russia reverted to political recentralisation in the 2000s, establishing a new regime of memory. As observed by Walker (2018, 9), Vladimir Putin embarked on a "mission to fill the void left by the 1991 collapse and forge a new sense of nation and purpose in Russia" by manipulating the past and elevating the victory in WWII "to a national founding myth". Framed as both a common triumph and grief, the victory provides a powerful source of pride for the country's diverse ethnic groups, whose ancestors fought and died in the war. Essentially, it serves as a tool for promoting militarised patriotism and interethnic unity, setting an example of how people of different nationalities should come together to defend their country (see Vähä 2002).

In contrast, the history of the Russian-Caucasian War can potentially undermine the unification agenda and is therefore marginalised. For instance, in school history textbooks, the war is discussed, if at all, in very neutral terms (Urushadze 2018), with the episode of Circassian ethnic cleansing omitted. Furthermore, in recent years, Circassian activists have had trouble organising marches in commemoration of the victims of the Russian-Caucasian War (see Hansen 2019). Local officials, who

since 2004 have been appointed by the Kremlin in cooperation with the regional parliaments, have created different obstacles to prevent this event, viewing it as a form of grassroots political activism. The hosting of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, located on Indigenous Circassian land and remembered by them as "a site of suffering and death" of their ancestors (Richmond 2013, 161), further underscores the federal authorities' disregard for the collective memory of the Circassians (see Petersson and Vamling 2017).

Amidst this political climate, local authorities in Kabardino-Balkariia, Adygea and Karachai-Cherkessia have distanced themselves from the nationalist sentiments of the 1990s and adopted an accommodationist stance, demonstrating loyalty to the Kremlin (see Zhemukhov 2012). Questions about the Circassian genocide are currently raised by the Circassian diaspora while receiving much less emphasis in the North Caucasus. Nevertheless, the counter-memory of the Russian-Caucasian War persists, frequently resurfacing in various forms and at different levels despite decades of suppression and the present repressive political environment.

THE RUSSIAN-CAUCASIAN WAR IN MODERN LOCAL OFFICIAL DISCOURSES

Unlike the Kremlin, the government in Adygea (as well as in Kabardino-Balkariia and Karachai-Cherkessia) cannot avoid expressing their stance on the Russian-Caucasian War as it plays a central role in the history and self-identification of the Circassians (Urusadze 2018). Since the 1990s, authorities in Adygea have been holding annual memorial ceremonies to pay tribute to the Circassians deceased and displaced as a result of the conquest. In 2013, the "Monument of Memory and Unification" was opened in Maykop, the capital of Adygea, to commemorate the victims of the war. The official name of the monument reflects the message that the local authorities wish to convey to the population: while remembering the painful past, both Circassians and Russians need to cherish the present peace and strive to prevent the recurrence of similar tragedies.

In recent years, official speeches, mass media broadcasts and social media posts made on 21 May – the last day of the war, known among the Circassians as the Day of Remembrance and Mourning – have consistently followed a similar pattern. After recognising the past sufferings of the Circassians, a statement is made about the importance of the present peace and interethnic unity. An Instagram post by the head of the Republic of Adygea, Murat Kumpilov, clearly demonstrates this shift in focus:

> Every year on 21 May, we pay tribute to our ancestors, bow our heads in memory of the victims and, with a heavy heart, reconsider the scale of that terrible tragedy, which left an indelible mark on the history of Adygea.

> Looking to the past, we increasingly realise the significance of the values of peace and harmony, the preservation of unity, so that our children and grandchildren can live on their land under a peaceful sky […]. May our ancient land never see war! (Kumpilov 2021, translation mine)

Such rhetoric promotes a harmonising discourse, indicating that in commemorating 21 May, the Circassians do not seek revenge or justice but pay tribute to their painful past while maintaining a positive and hopeful outlook on the present and future. By presenting the Day of Remembrance and Mourning in this light, local authorities acknowledge the significance of the Russian-Caucasian War for the Circassians while remaining loyal to the federal centre, distancing themselves from the political activism and calls for recognition of the Circassian genocide voiced in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Notably, modern official statements and reports refrain from naming the aggressor responsible for the destruction and deportation of the Circassian population. To illustrate, the conquest of the Caucasus is usually referred to by local officials as the "Caucasian War" instead of the "Russian-Caucasian" or "Russian-Circassian War" preferred by parts of the Circassian community (see Zhemukhov 2012). For local authorities, the use of these alternative names might contribute to the "ethnicisation" and politicisation of the past conflict, potentially escalating interethnic tensions in the republic (see Khanakhu and Tsvetkov 2015). Furthermore, official statements avoid identifying the adversary while talking about the suffering of the Circassians. For example, in a news report about the memorial concert held in Maykop in 2021, the narrator of the main local TV channel stated that it was "fate" that "ruthlessly ground the Circassian people in its millstones and scattered them all over the world" (@gtrkadygeia 2021, translation mine). This phrasing shifts the focus away from the victim-perpetrator paradigm, portraying the hardships of the Circassians as unavoidable and dictated by fate.

Similar tendencies are observed in how the memory of the Russian-Caucasian War is dealt with in public schools in Adygea. Unlike during Soviet times when the topic was forbidden, modern children do learn about the Russian-Caucasian War as schools started participating in commemorating the Day of Remembrance and Mourning in the 2010s. As reported by the interviewed teachers of Circassian language and literature, there are "*besedy*" (conversations) about the Russian-Caucasian War for the Circassian children encouraged by the local authorities. Students also learn about the war from literary works by local writers that they study in Circassian literature classes. One teacher respondent shared that in discussing this sensitive topic, she emphasises that what happened to the Circassians in the nineteenth century was "nobody's fault". Instead of looking for culprits, she steers the conversation

towards the deep love of the Circassians for their homeland, emphasising that those who stayed, made "a wise decision", to use her words.

Another teacher stated that she highlights to her students that it was a "tsarist" policy that exiled the Circassians from their homeland. This emphasis helps to distance these events from the present and avoid ruminations about the responsibility of the modern Russian state for the wrongdoings of the past. She also stresses the attachment of the Circassians to their land, asking children how they would feel if someone forced them to leave their homeland. Thus, rather than creating tensions and generating anti-Russian sentiment, the topic of the war is used to teach students about appreciating their homeland and rationalising the choices of their ancestors, including those who fought to the death, those who refused to surrender and left, and those few who stayed and became subjects of the Russian Empire.

Certainly, schools are not children's only source of information about the Russian-Caucasian War. They can easily learn about it from the Internet, finding a range of interpretations, or from their parents and relatives who might hold views different from those sustained by the official narrative. In recent years, schoolchildren have been preparing video projects for the Circassian Day of Remembrance and Mourning. Some are shared on schools' official social media accounts. In several of the reviewed videos, students referred to the conquest as the "Russian-Caucasian War" and included an image[5] frequently used by the Circassians in the diaspora that depicts the conflict as a genocide of the Circassians. Like the term "Russian-Caucasian War", the word "genocide" is currently discouraged in the official discourse in Adygea. Having access to alternative sources of information, students, however, might be exposed to less euphemistic ways of talking about the war and make them part of their own narratives.

Overall, in commemorating the war, local authorities must strike a balance between recognising the traumatic history of the Circassians and expressing support for the federal government's aim to stabilise interethnic dynamics. To achieve this, they employ a tactic similar to Russia's own approach to addressing some of its other dark pasts (e.g., Stalin's repressions). Specifically, the memory of past wrongdoings is appropriated with the goal of supporting the present agenda and "learning the correct lessons from history" (McGlynn 2023, 20). The rhetoric of modern official statements echoes Yeltsin's 1994 address to the peoples of the North Caucasus. It stresses the devastating impact of the Russian-Caucasian War and urges the Circassians to work towards maintaining peace. Unlike in discourses within the diaspora, officials in Adygea do not demand accountability but use the memory of the war to align with the state's efforts to foster a sense of unity and stability.

5 The image can be found at www.pinterest.com/pin/241787073717537316 (accessed 16.07.2024).

REOPENING OLD WOUNDS: INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN-CAUCASIAN WAR

Although the local government in Adygea portrays the Russian-Caucasian War as an event of the distant past, contrasting it with the "harmonious" present, federal and regional policies and decisions often reopen old wounds. For example, authorities of the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions have recently erected monuments throughout the North Caucasus that celebrate the generals of the Russian-Caucasian War. Some (e.g., General Alexey Ermolov and General Grigory Zass) are infamous for carrying out atrocities against the local civilian population (see Richmond 2013). These historical figures are also commemorated in the names of streets, museums, and even commercial products (e.g., mineral water branded "General Zass"). While in narratives constructed by Russian authorities, they are presented as "heroes", the Circassians and other peoples of the Caucasus consider them the "murderers" of their ancestors (see Foxall 2013). The appearance of their monuments and names in city landscapes and on the market provokes outrage among the Circassians and reveals cracks in the façade of modern interethnic "harmony".

Similarly, the selection of Sochi as the host city for the 2014 Olympics raised questions among the Circassians in Adygea. Sochi holds symbolic significance as the site where, on 21 May 1864, the Russians held their victory parade and where Circassians "died by the thousands as they waited for ships to take them to the Ottoman Empire" (Richmond 2013, 2). Thus, while not directly opposing the games, a significant number of Circassians believed that this decision offended the memory of their ancestors (Khanakhu and Tsvetkov 2015). Addressing the issue, President Putin claimed that "the Circassian factor" was being used by the West in an attempt to deter Russia and thanked the Circassian leaders in the Caucasus for being "wise" and supporting the Olympics (Smertin 2014). That is, instead of acknowledging that the games evoked painful memories among some part of the Circassian population, the president dismissed these concerns as foreign provocations and reverted to the narrative of interethnic agreement.

Despite denial by the federal authorities, such insensitive reminders about the Russian-Caucasian War do trigger resentment among even those Circassians who do not associate themselves with ethnic activism and identify as patriotic citizens of Russia. In what follows, I offer two examples of how this resentment surfaced in two individual interviews.

The War That "Never Happened"

Timur is a 55-year-old Circassian male who grew up and lived all his life in Adygea. Having worked for a long time in tourism, he is deeply knowledgeable about the history of the republic. He brought up the topic of the Russian-Caucasian War while

discussing the differences in attitudes to the Circassian language and culture before and after *perestroika*. In the excerpt below, Timur describes the time it was forbidden to talk about the war (see Appendix A for transcription conventions):

1. **Timur (T):** […] well I don't want to drag [you] into these depths in these historical
2. let's say events […] but as a result (1.0) of quite clear and
3. well-known events at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries
4. (**Interviewer-I:** uhum) when there were massive population movements here
5. (**I:** uhum) the map so to speak changed and everything became
6. completely different (0.5) but (2.0) back in those Soviet times like I said even
7. these facts were silenced (**I**: uhum) they are not even-
8. it was forbidden to talk [about them
9. **I:** [it was forbidden to talk about the Caucasus war[6] then?
10. **T:** uh?
11. **I:** about the Caucasus War it was forbidden to talk?
12. **T:** but it never happened (**I:** ah ((soft chuckle))) it never happened and there were
13. no Circassians here (**I:** hmmm) there was this doctrine that since <u>olden</u> times
14. <u>historically</u> ↑epochally the Cossacks had lived here
15. (0.5) well it's ridiculous of course […] [INT, 10/2020]

At the beginning of the excerpt, Timur seems hesitant to discuss the war and the Soviet policy but decides to continue anyway. He then carefully monitors his language, avoiding such words as "war", referring to it instead as "well-known events", and "deportation", which he describes as "massive population movements". His euphemistic word choices are also accompanied by mitigation markers "let's say" (line 2) and "so to speak" (line 5), which serve to decrease transparency, attenuate the effect of one's speech and distance the speaker from the utterance (Caffi 2005). By constructing his speech in such a way, Timur engages in self-silencing (see Malewska-Szałygin 2021). He is broaching an "unsafe" topic, the discussion of which had been forbidden for a long time, and explores my reaction to it. Studies show that the Russians and the Circassians have different attitudes towards the Russian-Caucasian War, with the former tending to downplay its significance and deny its aggressive character (Khanakhu and Guchetl 2013). The sensitive nature of the topic and my identity as a Russian make Timur cautious about his word choices.

In line 9, I interrupt Timur and ask directly if he is saying that it was forbidden to talk about the war. Timur prompts me to repeat the question, after which, he responds with irony, saying that the war never happened. According to the pretence

6 At the time of the interview in 2020, I was unaware of the potential significance of different designations for the war among the Circassians and used the name I encountered most frequently in official discourses in Adygea.

theory of irony, by using irony, “a speaker is pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an unintended audience”, expecting the interlocutor to “discover the pretense” (Clark and Gerrig 1984, 121). In lines 12–14, Timur pretends to be a transmitter of official Soviet memory, which postulated in the 1960s and 1970s that the Russian-Caucasian War never happened and presented the Cossacks as the Indigenous population of the Black Sea coast. My interjections and chuckle indicate I recognise Timur’s irony. He mocks the Soviet doctrine, stressing words and finding three different ways to say that the Cossacks were the original inhabitants of the North Caucasus, a statement that he describes as “ridiculous”.

As argued by Clark and Gerrig (1984), irony suggests a shared knowledge between speaker and listener, which results in increased intimacy. Indeed, after this exchange, Timur’s language became less evasive as he expressed his indignation at the Soviet policy of silencing inconvenient history. He then stated that the current situation was not much better:

1. **T:** well what can I say (0.5) up to the present day
2. at the federal level - between you and me this all continues (1.0)
3. well I will give a simple example […] I think it was actually
4. beyond blasphemous to choose exactly this
5. place and hold [exactly
6. [**I:** the Olympics?
7. **T**: well the Olympics in Krasnaia Poliana (**I:** uhum) everyone who
8. understands at least <u>something</u> in history realises the role of
9. Krasnaia Poliana (**I:** uhum) in those (0.5) <u>unpleasant</u> trust me bloody events
10. (**I**: uhum uhum) and well at the right moment they gave the idea
11. in such a way to the main person who - well, I’m sure he basically
12. never knew about it probably (0.5) °simply due to the fact that he
13. didn’t know° (**I:** uhum) and to the the whole world- there we are -
14. this immediately caused a lot of objections, rejection (**I**: uhum)
15. (1.0) it’s like to arrange Saint Vitta dance on the bones of the ancestors

Line 2 illustrates Timur’s greater comfort discussing current injustices with me, as evidenced by his use of the expression “between you and me”. He then talks about the decision of the Russian authorities to hold the 2014 Olympics in Sochi (also called Krasnaia Poliana). In contrast to vague and indirect language in the previous excerpt, Timur takes an openly negative and judgemental stance, calling the decision of the federal centre “*sverkhkoshchunstvenno*” (beyond blasphemous). I interrupt him and name the event to show that we indeed have a shared understanding and that his trust is justified. In line 9, Timur still uses euphemistic language, calling the war “unpleasant events” but adds a more expressive adjective “bloody”.

Timur then speculates about how the decision to hold the Olympics in Sochi was made. In his understanding, President Putin, whom he does name directly but refers to as "the main person", was simply uninformed about the significance of Sochi to the Circassians. In saying this, Timur shows that he does not blame the president for creating a situation that outraged Circassians all over the world. Describing the Olympics in Sochi metaphorically as dancing "on the bones of the ancestors", he further indicates his highly negative attitude towards it and brings to the fore the discrepancy between the tragic historical events and recent festivities that took place on the same ground.

These excerpts illustrate that the Russian-Caucasian War is still a highly sensitive topic. To discuss it, interlocutors might want to first establish trust and explore each other's views, for example, through self-silencing. Indignation at holding the 2014 Olympics in Sochi presupposes criticism of the federal government that chose this location. However, Timur does not name those responsible for disrespecting the collective memory of the Circassians and even takes the blame away from the president. His views resemble current official discourses in Adygea that focus on the pain of the Circassians without making accusations. This suggests that dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition of the Circassians' traumatic past does not necessarily translate into dissent. The next section provides further evidence for this observation.

"I Like to Speak the Truth as It Is"

Goshnago is a 70-year-old woman whom I met in the local archive while conducting my research. Having learned about the topic of my project, she volunteered to give an interview. Unlike Timur, Goshnago did not spend time exploring my views about the Russian-Caucasian War and did not try to soften her language. She noted that she "liked to speak the truth as it is", even if it was unpleasant or did not align with the official narrative. She brought up the topic of the war early in the interview, explaining that the Circassian language is disappearing because the Circassians are a minority in Adygea, an outcome of the conquest and the Soviet territorial arrangements. In the following excerpt, she discusses how part of the traditional Circassian territory was transformed into a separate region and named after a tsarist admiral who served in the Russian-Caucasian War:

1. **Goshnago (G):** [...] they called it Lazarevskii region and immediately
2. erected the bust of Lazarev (1.0) (**I:** uhum) so this is the <u>one</u> under whose
3. <u>leadership</u> (0.5) blood was flowing like a river (**I:** uhum)
4. the Circassian blood (1.0) (**I:** uhum) this is the <u>one</u> under whose leadership
5. it was allowed to rape children- girls from eight years old (1.0) ((inhales))

6. […] I just recently read about it- he gets a monument here we ↑go
7. (**I:** uhum) (0.5) Zass who issued this order – there is his monument in Labinsk-
8. books are written about them ↑streets are named after them […] [INT, 07/2019]

Goshnago contrasts the unspeakable atrocities committed under the commands of Russian military leaders and the current politics around constructing and naming monuments that glorify them. She begins with a general expressive description ("the Circassian blood was flowing like a river"), punctuating her speech with frequent pauses and stressing words, thereby signalling her heightened emotive involvement and creating a dramatic effect (Selting 1994). She then moves on to provide horrific details of the Russian invasion. The authorised rape of children, which she talks about in line 5, stands as the epitome of shocking barbarity exhibited by the Russian army. As she speaks, Goshnago raises her voice several times, which indicates her indignation and contributes to the high emotional intensity of the moment.

Throughout the interview, Goshnago used similar emphatic speech to discuss how the Circassians were further expelled from their territories due to Soviet territorial restructuring. She also criticised Soviet narratives that claimed that the Russians brought "civilisation" and "culture" to the peoples of the North Caucasus. Despite her critical stance, towards the end of the interview, Goshnago started normalising the decisions of the authorities that resulted in the current minority status of the Circassians:

1. **G:** the absolute majority of those living here are Russians (**I:** uhum)
2. (1.0) […] I read somewhere that it was done <u>deliberately</u> –
3. such was the policy-very far-sighted by the way (0.5) I am not bashing it =
4. if they are the winners→ the winners do everything as it <u>should</u> be
5. done (1.0) and during the Soviet time→ try that - to bring
6. <u>so many</u> nationalities to one denominator = it's not <u>that</u> easy […]
7. and I'm grateful to the Soviet power = it was a completely
8. different time (0.5) it's (1.0) people were loved→ equality was the goal →
9. everything was normal = wonderful (**I:** uhum) I really regret about the Soviet Union
10. **I:** about its dissolution?
11. **G:** yes↓

In lines 1–3, Goshnago refers to the tsarist policies that aimed to replace the autochthonous population of the Black Sea coast with Cossacks, considered loyal to the state. The outcomes of this policy are visible to this day; therefore, Goshnago approvingly calls it "far-sighted". What she states next is evocative of the common Russian saying "*pobeditelei ne sudiat*" (winners are not judged). Despite realising

its devastating effect on the Circassians, Goshnago demonstrates her understanding of the tsarist policy and normalises it, saying that "the winners do everything as it should be done". This indicates her acceptance of the plight of the Circassians and rationalisation of the tsarist and, later, Soviet population policies.

She then speaks highly of the Soviet Union's nationality policies that managed, as she puts it, to bring its multiethnic population to a common denominator. She most likely refers to the efforts to impose a "supranational" Soviet identity on different ethnic groups, aimed at surpassing nationalist, ethnic and religious interests (see Vähä 2002). In lines 5–9, Goshnago's tone gradually escalates from implied approval to explicit praise of the Soviet Union, where, in her words, "everything was wonderful". This statement, which stands in stark contrast to her earlier criticism, indicates that Goshnago idealises and prioritises the unity of the peoples of the former USSR over her counter-memory of the injustices committed against the ethnic group with which she identifies. As the following excerpt illustrates, she continues to value unity in the present, claiming that ethnic boundaries in Russia are easily overcome by the surge in patriotism prompted by external threats:

1. **G**: The US is even at war with Russia (0.5) when these moments arise →
2. (0.5) they do not understand that patriotism in us rises two- threefold […]
3. we all Russians and non-Russians (1.0) can instantly come together as one fist
4. (**I:** uhum) and will make things hot- we still have experience (**I:** uhum)
5. that you can't even imagine- they think they broke down the USSR [so]
6. they will break down Russia […]

Goshnago presents the United States as a common enemy, against which all multiethnic peoples of Russia stand united. She highlights that ethnic differences become irrelevant in the face of a common threat to the country. Her rhetoric becomes combative ("come together as one fist"; "we will make things hot"), and her use of personal pronouns creates a clear boundary between "them", the Americans, and "us", the peoples of Russia, regardless of ethnicity. "Experience" in line 4 must refer to the victory in WWII, which, as explained earlier, is used in modern Russia to cultivate militarised patriotism.

Goshnago's understanding of patriotism, rooted in Soviet-era discourse about the struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States echoes ideas currently propagated by state-sponsored media. Asserting that the very existence of Russia is threatened by American imperialism and the expansion of NATO, they are calling on its population to come together and defend Russia's sovereignty, which is allegedly at stake in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Goshnago's thinking indicates that Soviet indoctrination and current propaganda have been quite effective. Despite

being aware of and critical of the historical mistreatment of the Circassians, she sets aside her grievances and prioritises her identity as a citizen of Russia over her counter-memory of the trauma inflicted upon her people.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The article examined how the topic of the Russian-Caucasian War is addressed at three different levels in Russia, seeking to understand how painful memories of the past might interact with the perception of Russia's contemporary aggression in Ukraine. As illustrated, after the 1990s and early 2000s, when the Circassians started to voice their counter-memory, Putin's unification efforts clamped down on these efforts, silencing or dismissing their concerns. Pro-Kremlin authorities in Adygea cannot afford to remain silent about the impact of the Russian-Caucasian War but approach it in a manner that does not aggravate the federal government, emphasising the importance of interethnic agreement in the present. Against this backdrop, individual narratives about the war present a less harmonious outlook and raise issues about the federal and regional politics of commemoration and the use of Circassian lands for international festivities. My participants mocked past memory regimes while still silencing themselves or, on the contrary, bringing to the fore their counter-memory of the war and its horrific details. Expressing resentment about the lack of recognition of the war's atrocities at the federal level, they did not criticise the authorities and even justified them.

Importantly, the fieldwork was conducted in 2019–2021, before Russia waged a full-fledged war on Ukraine. Nonetheless, the analysed interview excepts provide important insights into how some Circassians position themselves within the Russian state and how they might react to conflicts in which it is involved. The analysis illustrates that at least for some members of the Circassian community in the North Caucasus – presumably the older ones who went through Soviet education and are relying on state-controlled TV as a main information source – loyalty to the state takes precedence over ethnic grievances. The official memory regime, which elevates victory in WWII and downplays dark pasts, creates a hierarchy of identities and memories, ensuring that individuals' civic identity and memories of their relatives' contributions to the fight against fascism are not undermined by ethnic affiliation. Even in the case of the Circassians, who have weighty reasons to hold grudges against the federal centre, this strategy appears effective.

To return to the question of the Circassian filmmaker cited at the beginning of the article, not all Circassians see similarities between Russia's past and modern colonial expansions, nor do they compare the plight of their ancestors with that of modern Ukrainians. For some Circassians in Adygea, the current invasion

of Ukraine is not perceived as colonial expansion. Rather, as the state propaganda insists, it is viewed as an existential and perennial fight against Western hegemony and fascism, aimed at preserving Russia's sovereignty and, more globally, safeguarding traditional human values. In this light, Circassians do not see themselves as a colonised and oppressed minority but, rather, as patriotic citizens of Russia who must "come together as one fist" to protect their country, as their relatives did during WWII. This orientation creates a deep ideological divide between them and Circassian activists in diasporas, who often take an openly anti-Russia stance. Whenever the latter draw increased attention to the question of Circassian genocide, the federal government frames their claims as external provocations that seek to destabilise Russia. By using the external threat argument, the official discourse taps into the North Caucasus Circassians' identity as Russian citizens, presenting diaspora activism as a manipulative politicisation of the past that can have dire consequences today.

To be sure, the article provides just a glimpse into what might make the Russian invasion of Ukraine justifiable to Circassians and other ethnic minorities in Russia. There are other motivations to approve and even participate in the war – financial gain, for example. There are also numerous Circassians in the homeland who, mindful of their own history, do not support the invasion of Ukraine but are unable to express their dissent openly due to potential repercussions. Their perspectives and memories, unaccounted for in this article, can become the subject of future ethnographic investigations when such research becomes possible and safe in Russia.

Nevertheless, the paper offers an important contribution to this special issue by highlighting the necessity for closer examination of memory and identity hierarchies in modern Russia to better understand the dynamics of resistance and accommodation within its multiethnic groups. Following Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, both foreign and domestic political analysts have engaged in discussions about the possible disintegration of the Russian Federation fuelled by the outrage of ethnic minorities disproportionally affected by the invasion and historically oppressed by the state (e.g., Coalson 2023). While the offensive indeed mobilised some ethnic activists within Russia and abroad, prompting reflection on their histories and current marginalisation within Russia, there are no solid grounds for assuming that their campaigns have significantly threatened the current regime. Those who grew up and were educated in the Soviet Union were trained to downplay their ethnic identities and counter-memories as the official regime elevated Russian culture and promoted a totalitarian view of history. Modern Russia follows in these footsteps, using education and media to sanitise its past and perpetuate a hierarchy of identities and memories for new generations. Certainly, the existence of diasporas, experiences of living and studying abroad and the accessibility of alternative, non-state-controlled sources of information all create challenges for this endeavour. Yet,

by resorting to repression, censorship and rhetoric about "external enemies", Russian authorities have been able to contain ethnic dissent.

Although the counter-memories of ethnic minorities in Russia do not necessarily lead to open resistance to the oppressive state, reflections on their traumatic past are important for their self-identification, connection with diasporas and continuity as distinct cultural groups. It is reasonable to assume that such narratives, divergent from the official whitewashed version of history, will remain significant both for those in the diasporas and the homeland, persisting in some form even in the increasingly repressive climate in Russia. A change in regime will likely bring about different master narratives, possibly creating opportunities for reconfiguring the relationship between the state and local ethnic identities and, hopefully, bringing a sense of justice and closure to those still grappling with the consequences and safeguarding the memories of their repressed traumatic past.

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TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS
(ADAPTED AND MODIFIED FROM CLAN MANUAL FOR THE CEAPP PROJECT)

The number inside the parentheses represents the length of the pause
= Contiguous utterances (latching)
[Overlapping utterances
<u>Word</u> indicates emphasis
-Abrupt stop in articulation, cut-off
↑ Rise in pitch
↓ Fall in pitch at the end of the utterance
→ Continuing intonation
◦ ◦ Soft speech

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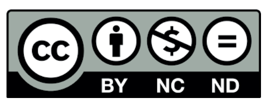

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WAR AND THE FIELD

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In the spring of 1999, while NATO forces were bombing Serbia, I was doing fieldwork in the Western Siberia. Russia was clearly on Serbia's side in this conflict, and countless patriotic and anti-war actions were taking place throughout the country. Both the war and these patriotic actions were given great publicity in the media, and state propaganda successfully monopolised the local discourse on it. Given the situation, former relations between the anthropologist-fieldworker and the locals were reassessed. My relationship with the field changed. It was not me who felt in danger, but I was worried about my family living close to the Croatian border, influenced by Russian propaganda and isolation from my home. This changed my perception of reality, and I found myself experiencing "existential shock". My previous intimate relationships were shaken by the propaganda-fuelled paranoia brought about by the war. The wartime hegemony had raised the possibility of a negative interpretation of me in addition to the former positive ones – in short, it had occurred to people that I might actually be an enemy or source of danger. During this period of my fieldwork, I was suspected of being a hostile spy. To understand this situation, the question of researcher neutrality had to be raised. War is closely connected to group identity and, consequentially, shapes personal identities, reinforces previous ones, creates new ones and spurs individuals with multiple identities to choose between them. The bombing of Serbia exerted a potent effect on the mechanisms of Russian identity: it reinforced the *Rossijanin* ("Russian citizen") identity, the basis for the Russian state identity that reigned following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The strengthening of this identity also had an elemental effect on the local Indigenous people, drawing them towards a "pan-Slavic" identity and reinforcing the role of the former Soviet identity.
News of a Russian-Ukrainian war escalating in 2022 came as a serious shock to me, an anthropologist engaged in field research in Russia. On the one hand, it was a significant detriment to my identity as a researcher, as the field station I had been intending to visit seemed likely to become closed off to the world. Secondly, the Russian invasion curtailed any opportunity of communicating with my various Siberian acquaintances. However, the job of the anthropologist offers no exemption from reporting on war and violent conflict. Where the necessity arises, methods, concepts and theories must be found that

permit the development of a viable approach. In solving – or in the current situation, attempting to solve – the predicament outlined above, the only possible point of departure I had were my field studies conducted in 1999.

KEYWORDS: war, researcher as a spy, neutrality, Rossijanin identity, the mother-system

On 24 February 2022, just one day before the Defender of the Fatherland Day, Russia invaded Ukraine, thus escalating a war that had begun eight years prior. For me, an anthropologist engaged in field research in Russia, the news came as a serious shock. On the one hand, it was a significant detriment to my identity as a researcher, as the field station I had been intending to visit seemed likely to become closed off to the world. The threat was particularly pronounced in that, historically, Hungarian studies of Siberia had always suffered from regional inaccessibility, so much so that during the 75-year span from the First World War to the political transformation in 1989 hardly any scholars had been able to travel there.

On the other hand, the Russian invasion curtailed any opportunity of communicating with my various Siberian acquaintances. At first, contact remained possible through the online space, but on 4 March 2022, Russia cut off almost all access to Meta, placing all communication via web 2.0 services predominantly under state control and criminalising open discussion of the war. I was, for all practical purposes, cut off from my Khanty acquaintances – censorship and self-censorship on both their part and mine conspiring to block all open communication. Thus, today, I have no direct information on how the ongoing war is affecting them.

To solve – or, given the current situation, attempt to solve – these problems, I have turned to my studies conducted in the field in 1998 and 1999, a set of experiences whose analysis can presumably shed light on the processes currently underway in my field. During these seven months, as I was working among the Siberian Khanty people, NATO launched its bombing campaign of Serbia, an event that had a significant impact on my work opportunities and relationships with locals while also serving as an opportunity to observe how a local society reacted to war.

Conducted between December 1998 and June 1999, this was my second fieldwork project along the Vasyugan River among Khanties. This time, however, after a good three months there, I left the Vasyugan for the Yugan River so that I could continue my research in the latter. However, for different reasons not elaborated here, I returned back to Vasyugan three weeks later. It was at precisely this time – from 24 March to 11 June 1999 – that NATO bombed Serbia[1] in response to

1 The official name of the operation was "Allied Force" or "Noble Anvil", and in Serbian it was called "Merciful Angel".

the strife and ethnic cleansing that had developed in Kosovo. Russia had come down clearly on the side of Serbia and was leveraging every political means at its disposal in the latter nation's support while news of the conflict reigned supreme in Russian political discourse. The entirety of the Russian media was mobilised in favour of Serbia, with public opinion, too, taking a firm position, as evinced by the numerous patriotic and anti-war campaigns that sprung up across the country, including even Russian sympathy initiatives *within* Serbia. Although Russia was not a direct participant in the conflict, intense and wide-ranging discussion of it defined public discourse, with the result that people *felt* involved. In public opinion, the verdict was clear: Serbia and its people, Russia's Orthodox brothers, were not just participants, but victims – and where there are victims, there are perpetrators. As a result, the war became – as they often do – an antagonistic struggle between victim and criminal, good and evil. NATO and the West were seen as the "Evil Empire", the Antichrist.[2]

Throughout March, both the Yugan and Vasyugan populations burned with the fever of war, a result of the publicity the conflict and its patriotic manifestations were given in state media, the only source of information available in the region. It must be noted at this point that in the Vasyugan region, only one channel, Public Russian Television (ORT), Russia's primary state-controlled broadcasting service, was reliably available until as late as the late 1990s. The number of available radio stations was somewhat higher. Although, at the time, there was still the state or "people's" radio, one could also listen to a number of commercial and local stations. There was no internet connection around the Vasyugan during my fieldwork, and, in the Yugan villages I visited, the situation was even worse: there, the population had neither internet nor television, not even state radio, leaving broadcasts received by pocket radio as the only source of news. It was this media context that made state propaganda so effective, permitting local discourse on the war to proceed virtually single-mindedly.

Given Hungary's accession to full NATO membership – the conclusion of a decade-long process – in March of 1999, it was a decidedly delicate situation I found myself in. From this point forward, I was regarded by those in the territory as a representative of a hostile nation. A line of demarcation having been drawn between my work area and my home, I had myself become a participant in war.

I was neither directly involved in the conflict, nor even present in an involved nation. I was "merely" a person residing in a location where the war was strongly felt, despite the lack of direct involvement on the part of that country or my home country. Cynthia Enloe (1989), noting the lack of feminine viewpoints in studies of military

2 This line of thinking, expressed in precisely the same manner, appeared (among other places) in the 20 April edition of the talk show *Взгляд* (meaning 'opinion' or 'viewpoint'), which I viewed while there, in the territory.

conflict, contends that the discourse on the topic of war should not be limited to frontline, masculine, Western and European perspectives. If this is the case, I believe it relevant to speak here of my own involvement in the conflict as personal. It is my conviction that my example demonstrates both how a researcher can be affected by war and how potent and various the forces in question can be. To this end, I will examine in detail three specific topics: (1) how the war affected how my research was conducted; (2) how it influenced my relationships in the field; and (3) what conspicuous changes it prompted in the society under scrutiny. The first of these I examine in relation to my work in the Yugan region, while the second and third are answered with reference to my time in the Vasyugan area.

FIELDWORK

The impact the outbreak of war had on my work was profound. In its wake, the Russian media began pushing a continuous threat of escalation, the primary suggestion being that Serbia would respond by attacking and/or bombing neighbouring countries. My own family lived in the town of Pécs in Hungary, the NATO member state closest to Serbia, little more than 50 km from the Serbian border as the crow flies. As a result, I felt my family could very well be in serious, immediate jeopardy.

Though, as I noted before, the entire Russian media functioned as a megaphone for state propaganda, it was nonetheless my only source of news. I lost all living contact with Hungary and my family, and, despite every suspicion to the contrary, I, too, began to view the images flooding in continuously from the media as the only possible reality: from the perspective of this closed space, each and every one of my fears seemed perfectly valid. To make things worse, the Vasyugan region had incomparably better transportation options than the Yugan's upper reaches, which were virtually impassable by anything other than snowmobile, to the point that even Ugut, the nearest major settlement, seemed all but out of reach.

On 24 March, succumbing to the news and my constant worries, I decided to return by whatever means necessary to my previous area of study. On 13 April, I described my reasoning to a close friend and colleague in the following terms:

> The other point of absolute importance was that damned bombing they've started in Yugoslavia. Even before the first bombs fell, the radio was blaring that Milošević was going to retaliate by bombing Macedonia and Hungary. It made me nervous at the outset, but when I got the news that it had started, I decided right then, it was back to the Vasyugan for me. Why would this be better?... There's a telephone here I can use to reach Hungary at any time to find out what's going on. And, from

> the Vasyugan, I can leave for home whenever I want. I had to make the decision in a hurry because it was the end of March, and within a week or two, it was expected that the roads would degrade, and travel by snowmobile would become impossible. At that point, I would have been trapped in the village [...] for two months until the waterways opened. What that would have meant was that [...] if – God forbid – something happened at home, there would have been no way for me to reach them. Because [...] the nearest telephone and "traffic hub" was 250 km away, and I just couldn't risk it. […] I know I would never have been able to just sit there, safe and working calmly while my family was potentially in danger or, in the best case, in an uncertain situation.

Fears for my family descended on me like a weight. I felt considerable tension between my field location and home with respect to security, and strangely enough, it was the former of the two that seemed safer and the latter more perilous.

In other words, through the medium of my family, I found myself in the type of situation Nordstrom and Robben (Nordstrom and Robben 1996, 13-14), speaking of researchers subjected to immediate danger, described as "existential shock", a term designating a reaction to hazards in the field, that is, situations where the boundaries between life and death have become unpredictable. As opposed to culture shock, which arises from confrontation with the logic of another culture, existential shock denotes a sense of the fragility, finiteness and senselessness of life. This fundamental helplessness or uncertainty shakes the foundations of one's commitment not only to the respect for society, study and diversity required of an anthropologist, but also to research in general. Moreover, it impacts the emotional, theoretical and practical aspects of the relationship between station and stationed, field and field researcher because – as researchers of the relationship between war and fieldwork unequivocally assert – the threatening nature of war necessarily shortens the time one can remain on the job.

Accordingly, fear had erected a wall between me and my research territory. Playing a significant role in this was experiencing these fears alone as the threat affected neither me nor my research subjects, but my family faraway. While a common fear can sometimes engender feelings of community between an anthropologist and the people he or she studies and so act as a force for integration (Simon 2019, 63-64), fear in isolation creates distance, thrusting the two asunder. Even worse in my case was that my informants and I found ourselves on opposite sides of the proverbial "front", so that rather than bringing us closer together, the situation pushed us further apart, or at least made it impossible to grow any closer. The practical result of this was an abrupt decision to depart for Hungary, the only possible route being via the Vasyugan; in fact, the idea was not to return to my former station for its own sake, but to

wind up my work for good and make my way home. Indicative of my level of commitment to this plan was that for the last week and a half of my stay in the Yugan region, I ceased keeping my field journal altogether, picking up again only on my return to the Vasyugan. Every minute I was forced to spend there was one that separated me from my family, and, therefore, the time no longer had anything to do with my fieldwork. I had slipped out of my role as an anthropologist and lost my identity as a field researcher.

As the personal and professional crisis began to consume me, I sunk into a compulsion to validate the threat the peril posed, a spiral of indecision between the merits of leaving versus staying, until at last, I decided to go. It was not until I arrived in Novy Vasyugan and called my family that I emerged from this spiral permanently, as my conversation with them revealed the threat to be nothing but a fiction of Russian state propaganda. Abruptly, the only logic my mind had previously been able to entertain crumbled – in fact, given the actual understanding of the war back home, it seemed ridiculous. Though the contours of the reality sketched out for me by Hungarian news and my family's stories *did* include the constant weight of conflict, there was no perception of immediate danger. As the foreboding and existential shock began to fade away, I changed my mind about returning home and committed to continuing my fieldwork, now in the region of the Vasyugan.

THE FIELD RESEARCHER AND THE LOCALS

At this point, it is important to establish once again that the period in question was not my first stint in the Vasyugan region. I had previously done field research in 1992, the year I met the family that would eventually become my hosts. The circumstances of our meeting were somewhat unusual: my first visit occurred during an expedition financed by a university in Tomsk.[3] The family's daughter, the institute's secretary at the time, travelled with us as part of the expedition. Her travels were also funded by the university, which was a great help to her and her family as she would not have had money to get home. Accordingly, when we reached the area, we were immediately treated as welcome and respected guests of the family. On the one hand, this distinguished status created an excellent situation for me as a researcher, as everyone wanted to help us and do us favours. At the same time, it also facilitated the emergence of a close and affectionate relationship with the family itself – very quickly they began treating me as one of their own, regularly referring to me as their "son", even speaking of me in the village as they would of a relative. The situation continued to improve when, three weeks later, I returned to them from the Yugan

3 My later fieldwork, in addition to that in 1998/99, was financed without Russian support.

River region, the impact of which on my work was extraordinarily positive. They regularly evaluated my "homecoming" as a result of my having become "one of them", "a true Ostyak" in absolute terms. Even the local Russians began to refer to me as a "compatriot".

The reason for stressing this point here is to highlight that *despite* all this, these intimate relationships were shaken by the propaganda-fuelled paranoia the wartime period brought about. In short, during this second trip to the region, I became suspected of being a hostile spy, a circumstance the professional literature notes can both shake a community's faith in a researcher (Howell 2007, 241) and even place him or her in immediate danger (Sluka 2007b, 264).

The suspicions of subjects may even be founded in previous bad experience – and indeed, if one looks back upon the history of the discipline, it becomes clear that the notion of the anthropologist as spy is not, in fact, entirely unrealistic. The emergence of such notions early in the history of anthropology occurred in parallel with the rise of actual espionage (Sluka 2007b), as discussed in Boas's (1973) controversial article of 1919, a condemnation of the practice and warning as to its dangers, as evinced by the events of World War II. Subsequent history, too, is riddled with examples of problematic anthropological projects that were, covertly or openly, government information-gathering campaigns: from the undercover anthropologists of World War II to the infamous South American Camelot Project, the Vietnam War programme Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), the very recent Human Terrain System programme, and many, many more.[4]

Dealing specifically with the topic of how anthropologists can become or come to be perceived as participants in espionage, we have the eminently important work of Cathrine Verdery (2018). Of course, her situation was – I believe – completely different from mine, as, for one thing, I never had the feeling (as she later did) that I was being watched, nor did I believe myself important enough to merit that distinction. Another significant difference was that I never had the opportunity of seeing the files kept on me, nor am I at all likely to in the near future. Though the region in which I conducted my fieldwork did belong to a crumbling empire, no actual regime change that would have enabled classified files to be made public ever took place. As the role of the secret services was never called into question on this point, the notion of opening people's files to scrutiny was never raised.

Thus, I have no way of knowing whether I ever, in fact, entered the purview of the region's surveillance institutions. As I was infinitely – probably foolishly – naïve, the thought never even crossed my mind. In the field, however, I never noticed anything to indicate I was being watched, nor did I sense that anyone was restricting

4 For more on this, see the summaries in Fluehr-Lobban 2003, McFate 2005 and Lucas 2009.

my movements in any way. In truth, I never registered myself in any municipality in the region outside the county seat of Tomsk, and even there only once, when the police called me in for informal questioning about a matter in which it was not likely my person that interested them, but rather the affair they were investigating.

Lending to my overall state of calm was that, fundamentally, I moved in circles where the likelihood of being watched seemed impossible. My research at the time concentrated almost exclusively on the Khanty, and I had immersed myself in their company – committed myself to them – in a way that made me expressly suspicious of the "majority society". At the gut level, moreover, I recoiled from anyone demonstrating an exaggerated taste for my company.

That the knowledge I gained in my research might be valuable to others, however, was a point that I *did* consider. Thinking back, I can identify a few people whose role I might have questioned or whom I might even suspect of having reported me. Of course, this impacts nothing after the fact, nor can I be certain such activities ever obstructed my work. It is important to note, however, that an informant can oftentimes be a fieldworker's helper, assistant – whether out of self-interest (to strengthen trust) or actual goodwill towards the researcher (Vargyas 2024).

In this changed situation, my own behaviour – formerly undeserving of suspicion – may easily have elicited the suspicions of locals. After all, I was constantly asking questions, including about topics the community was unused to discussing; I was also taking countless photographs, using a video camera and recording conversations with a voice recorder. I additionally used, made and received maps, both from private parties and the local forestry service. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I possessed better maps of the Khanty hunting grounds than anyone else in the village. What is more, it was clear to everyone I was engaged in soliciting and receiving village statistics, compiling censuses and drafting genealogies – all activities that fit the profile of a stereotypical spy.

To my knowledge, the idea that I might have been involved in espionage was no more than a reaction on the part of some of my local acquaintances and was not rooted in any official monitoring operation. Ultimately, this period remains, to my mind, the first and only time in my entire field career when suspicion would frequently arise as to who I was, what was I doing and why I was asking so many questions.

The sources of these inquiries included not just strangers, but even people with whom my relationship had formerly been close and confidential. In one compelling example, I had, as part of a larger company of people, struck up a conversation with a dispatcher who worked at the local airport. The mood was a casual one as I was not collecting field information at the time, and the discussion strayed to the topic of his job and place of employment. At that moment, one of my acquaintances, a person with whom I had been visiting regularly and who had previously inundated me with indications of trust, intervened sharply, demanding to know why I was interrogating

the dispatcher, what I wanted to know about the airport and why I needed this information in the first place.

It was also during this period that I noticed people worriedly concealing any suggestion of who among them had served in the military and where such people had been stationed, thinking such knowledge to be classified. Other information that gave them pause included the locations and workings of oil wells and the schedules of those who operated them. It was at this point that I first felt the locals take a heightened interest in my notes: some even asked to be permitted to read them, though when it was discovered that they were written in Hungarian, they lost enthusiasm and did not ask again. It was also at this time that I experienced the strongest verbal attack, coming from a close acquaintance, who, pondering my potential as an operative, remarked, "You really ought to be shot, because you're giving away all our secrets."

I tested a variety of techniques for handling these situations. The use of humour to try and defuse the conflict was met with abject failure: as it turns out, in that instance, patriotism was not a topic to be joked about. For this reason, based on previously established trust, I strove instead to modify my behaviour, acting as little like a "spy" as possible; avoiding various "hot" topics (i.e., anything to do with military service or oil drilling; Glazer 1970); and explaining as often and precisely as possible what I was doing, why I was doing it, why it interested me and what my objective was with the information I was recording.[5]

Another important question in this context – beyond espionage – is that of neutrality, which in my own case was defined by the war in Serbia and its reception by the locals in my environment. In reality, I was not an impartial observer in the course of this project. For me, the dividing line between parties was at first drawn between the Indigenous peoples and the majority population, a framework within which it was clear to me and to the Khanties where I stood. In contrast to my later research, which focused on local society as a whole, here, identifying with the Khanty, I avoided the Russian majority, especially those regarded as representing the local authorities or elites. Accordingly, I gave innumerable conscious signs of being on their side; however, a good number of unintentional habits were interpreted by both the Khanty and the majority population as indicating the same (Nagy 2021, 14-62).

During the war, however, the area where I was stationed grew more homogenous; the differences between the minority and majority lost so much significance to so many people that, at times, I found myself in opposition to everyone. Though my situation was still unambiguous, I was now positioned by default as an "enemy": I was *personally* a member of NATO, and they were suffering under "my" actions. As

5 The techniques Sluka recommends are similar (Sluka 2007b, 264).

a result, I often found myself in debates in which, because of the abovementioned metonymic relationship, they spoke with/about me in the second person plural instead of second person singular and tried to personally convince me that what "we" were doing was wrong. Thus, it was not *I* who decided what I represented, but *they* – virtually independent of how I positioned myself.

In short, as has been said by many who have come before me, "In times of heightened group antagonism there is little room for neutrality" (Glazer 1970, 314). A scientist must take sides, otherwise the members of the society under scrutiny will do so – will do the positioning – in his or her stead (Nash 1979, 233.). In the words of Sluka (2007b, 266), "Whether or not you take sides, those actively involved in the situation are going to define whose side they think you are on. They will act toward you on the basis of this definition, regardless of your professions of neutrality". Thus, during the bombing I could not and, in fact, did not want to show neutrality towards the warring parties. Even upon hearing how the hostilities were understood at home, I found myself slaloming back and forth in debates not started by me between avoidance and confrontation depending on my current mood and situation. In order to preserve my personal integrity and identity, I sometimes felt it necessary simply to plunge in and express my "Westernity".

Because it had been provoked by the bombing, my positioning as an enemy endured until my fieldwork was completed in 1999. During my latter stints, however, by which time the effect of the war had passed almost without a trace, the idea that I might be a hostile force or spy arose not even once. It is also true that not all had reacted in the same way in the first place: the intensity depended on how deeply the war had been permitted to penetrate an individual's life. Although occasionally my close acquaintances might have become suspicious or even turned against me, there were always others whose relationship with me did not change. It was significant from the standpoint of the success of the project that I never experienced – or at least never recognised – any form of suspicion on the part of the local bureaucracy.

THE LOCALS

War is a violent event that, by definition, erupts not between individuals but – imagined or real – communities (Harrison 2002: 560). For this reason, it is closely connected to group identity and, by consequence, to the shaping of personal identities, reinforcing previous ones, creating new ones and prompting individuals with multiple identities to choose between them.

The Serbian bombing, too, exerted a potent effect on Russian identity mechanisms, reinforcing the *Rossijanin* (Russian citizen) identity even on an everyday level. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the re-emergent Russian state had

attempted to forge a unifying identity for the citizens of the Russian Federation on statal and territorial grounds rather than national. Intended to replace the old Soviet identity, in reality, the concept of the Rossijanin was a construct revived by the Russian political elite, one built around perceived common interests, shared suffering and love of homeland.[6] It was exceedingly suited to the representation of state interests over individual ones, or indeed, to the replacement of individual interests by those of the state, as it created such intense loyalty as to preclude any possibility of resistance.

Because the Rossijanin identity emerged from an attack on the Serbs, a Slavic people, in a war that could be interpreted as a religious one – Orthodox against Western Christianity – it is understandable that this particular form of pan-Russian feeling would be strongly coloured by both pan-Slavism and religious affinity. Into this were drawn – logically, albeit in a peculiar fashion – not only the majority population but also the local, Indigenous minorities, including the Khanty, on the basis of national and ethnic transcendence. They, too, were regarded as part of the "pan-Slavic" populous, feeling personally affronted by the attack on Serbia, and indeed, spoke to me with deep indignation of the nerve of those who would attack "our Slavs" or "our Serbian brothers". Their rejection of the campaign was unambiguous and unanimous, as evidenced by an entire series of patriotic declarations. Though these manifested primarily in the rhetoric of ordinary conversations, there were some who would even have entered military service had their age permitted.

Another opportunity for the locals to express their Rossijanin patriotism was where the topic turned to domestic products, which they necessarily viewed as better than dubious foreign or Western ones: only Russian-manufactured goods were reliable, only the Russians knew what the people really needed; it was a peculiarity of their country – their "Russian" people – that they could repair anything, using anything – that for them, nothing was impossible. Once, roused by the Serbian air force's success in shooting down a "stealth bomber" using Russian-made air defences,[7] a Khanty hunter erupted in a whoop of joy: "What do they want, eh? See? We Russians can get even those! Our country is the strongest and best!"

The foundations for the Rossijanin identity lay in the memory of the Second World War or, as they called it, the Great Patriotic War.[8] A key element of the war was its

6 For more on the Rossijanin identity, see Miller 2008 and 2009, Pain 2009, Schorkowitz 2015 and Tishkow 2013.

7 On 27 March 1999, Vojvodina-native Zoltán Dani, serving in the Serbian air defence forces, is recorded as having shot down an F-117 Nighthawk stealth bomber.

8 For more on the ideology of the Great Patriotic War, see Makhotina 2021, Oushakine 2013 and Schattenberg 2021.

concretisation of the enemy: it had been a victory against fascism or, as better understood by the public, the Germans. It was presumably this that was reinforced when it was discovered that now, for the first time since World War II, the Germans had undertaken a military role in the Serbian bombing. As a result, everyday conversation was replete with anti-German discourse. In the words of one Khanty acquaintance: "I couldn't stand the Germans then, and I can't stand them now. I mean, what was all that compensation for? Should've saved it for Serbia when they needed it!"[9] To this, her husband, riling himself at the thought, added, "What are the Germans even doing there? Should've bashed their heads in or dropped a nuke on them when we had a chance. That've taught 'em." In another situation, I observed the same Khanty man rant about the Second World War in breathtakingly absurd fashion: "Should have shot every single one of those Germans or sent them all to hell – to Siberia!"[10]

In my research field, intense patriotism manifested itself in ordinary things, even among the Khanty and Russians: everything that came from Russia was good, everything foreign became bad, suspicious or dangerous. This same feeling came up regularly in their assessment of television programming. "These shows are worthless. They're probably shams. Who even knows. They should broadcast our Soviet films. At least we know what those are about," blurted out an acquaintance of mine after having watched an American movie. These same thoughts were expressed almost verbatim – to resounding applause – at an event where a large company of us were watching foreign music videos: "I don't like them. You can't even figure out what they're singing about. Could even be that they're fooling us."

It was at this time that, parallel with the strengthening of the Rossijanin identity, one increasingly experienced expressions of Soviet nostalgia of the sort seen above in relation to television broadcasts. In this conflict between Russia and the powers outside its borders, most locals with whom I was in regular contact spoke of themselves as "Soviets". In 1999, the memory of the Soviet Union, whose collapse had come as a serious shock, still lay at less than arm's length. Further, the disintegration of the former world power was, in their understanding, inseparable from the economic and social catastrophe of the "wild and evil 90s" (*likhie devianostye*). In accordance with their regressive sense of history (Nagy 2011, 198-219), the Soviet period had meant a secure living, reliable earnings, sufficient goods and better educational opportunities than those attainable under the anarchy of post-Soviet "democracy", with its collapsed economy, social security, public safety and financial viability.

9 This comment was made when the topic in the news was the deportation of the Volga Germans as collective punishment.

10 There is a lesson to be learned in the way they paint their own homeland as an inhuman setting and potential place of punishment.

In this context, the rallying Rossijanin identity associated itself with not only the "homeland" (*podina*) but also the "home authority" (*podnoĭ vlast'*) – as used in local parlance – equal, as we have seen, to the Soviet system. The positives of that system, real or imagined, were reported with great nostalgia: "The Soviet system was our home authority, the one in which, ultimately, whatever they say, we had everything. But today? Today, we live like pigs. We have nothing, and what we do have is garbage." The loyalty displayed toward the Soviet Union was greater than that accorded the new, sometimes nonsensical-seeming political formations. As one local woman put it, "Russia? What's Russia? Sounds like nothing. When they say it, you feel nothing. The Soviet Union? That was different. There you knew. Look what's become of this country. It's not a homeland anymore, but just the country where I live. My 'homeland' was the Soviet Union!"

CONCLUSION

The phenomena I have described in this writing can only be marginally generalised: I do not think that they apply to other Indigenous Siberians, for example, or even the Khanty living to the north of my field station. At the same time, they represent one new colour on the known scale of responses to war situations, assuredly a heterogenous spectrum of reactions.

The situation of the Vasyugan Khanty is largely determined by the political geographical reality of the region's inclusion in Tomsk Oblast, the former Narym Territory, a considerably different demographical, political and historical framework than would have been afforded them had they found themselves living in, for example, the Yamalo-Nenets or Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug (Yugra). The proportion of Khanty living today in the latter of these is itself low (1.14%), with the number living in Tomsk Oblast much smaller (0.005%). The majority of the Tomsk Oblast Khanty live in the Kargasoksky District, where I did my fieldwork, but even there they are but a small minority (0.88%). Within Tomsk Oblast as a whole, Khanties are found primarily in the northern part of the oblast but are by no means the largest Indigenous ethnic group in the county.

Behind the above demographic reality lies the region's location within the former Narym Kray, one of the destination territories of Stalin's deportation policy. Between 1931 and 1946, tens of thousands of people were resettled along the Vasyugan River on political or ethnic grounds, a circumstance that over the next decade and a half would radically alter the region's demographic makeup. By the end of the 1930s, the Vasyugan Khanty had become a tiny minority in their own lands, their villages eliminated or filled with deportees. Exacerbating this situation was the Second World War, from which only a very few conscripted Khanty men would ever return.

These two circumstances together led to an unusually large number of mixed marriages. For deportees – primarily, but not exclusively women – marriage to Indigenous partners was often the only way to escape starvation, as a local person's knowledge and connections meant access to the resources needed for survival. For post-war Khanty women, given the paucity of marriageable-aged men, there was often little choice but to enter into unions with members of the majority society. Demographic trends were also influenced by the advent in the 1960s of petroleum and gas drilling in the area, bringing a significant influx of labour migrants in the subsequent decades that would balance out the ongoing emigration of deportees back to their home territories.

Moreover, owing to the deportations, oil drillers arriving to the Vasyugan region were greeted by what was known as the "broken generation" (Vakhtin 1993: 46-49), a phenomenon in the north that was largely a product of the developing oil industry. Theirs was a generation of Khanty who were no longer capable of adapting to circumstances or acting as a community, one that no longer responded to new challenges or directly represented its own interests. This same group was also incapable of producing Khanty intellectuals, as those acquiring higher degrees of education within the given political system, inasmuch as they lived in mixed marriages, tended to define themselves as Russian. As a result, a Khanty intelligentsia capable of articulating the Khanty perspective at all was completely absent.

Another point of consideration regarding the Vasyugan Khanty's overall situation is the group's invisibility within regional public discourse. The reasons for this are to be sought in the logic of the oil industry, which dominates all spheres of life among the local people on the one hand, and of the deportee majority (and their descendants) on the other, which together have served to exclude them from the general discourse. Local narratives hold both groups – the deportees by virtue of their suffering and the oil miners by virtue of their heroism – as constituting the first settlers of the area, their presence representing a heroic effort, necessary or voluntary, towards taming the rugged natural environment. To acknowledge that another group had regarded the land as its own living space prior to their arrival would be irreconcilable with this heroic backstory. Thus, in official memory, the Khanty past bears no real weight, but is seen rather as background noise disturbing the community's common heroism.

It was these reasons taken together that ultimately led to a situation where the Vasyugan Khanty found (and presumably still find) themselves incapable of expressing their own viewpoint even in matters such as war, assuming instead a posture of adaptation and internalisation of the majority position. As we have seen, no local political environment exists in which they might be able to manifest a markedly minority opinion; nor is there any Khanty society that might function during wartime as

a unified – or even merely independent – forum for the interpretation of events; nor are there any local Khanty intelligentsia with the capability of expressing and representing minority views. This was even true, as I noted previously, with regard to the appreciably more flexible political environment that arose during the Yeltsin era. Today, we find nothing that would lead us to believe the situation might be any different. Political circumstances have hardened, with Russia's "patriotic turn" obscuring all but the views of the monolithic centre. It is an environment in which not even regional interests, let alone minority ones, can emerge.

As already noted, to attempt to draw conclusions about the present based on events that happened 25 years ago is problematic. The argument is supported both by the seeming majority of posts on online forums expressing support for the war and the current practice of sharing national military songs and videos. Of course, the picture one gets is necessarily distorted by state monitoring of the online space and criminalisation of public expressions of opinion, a state of affairs that can be felt even from Hungary. In this region, those who do not support the war at this time are invisible. The voice (and silence) of the Vasyugan that I have echoed in this paper merely adds to the polyphony that currently surrounds the relationship of Siberian Indigenous peoples to the Russian-Ukrainian war, permitting us to think about it in as nuanced a way as possible.

What we can state for certain is that without actual fieldwork, no real opinion on the matter may be formed. Such work would present serious challenges to any researcher from a NATO country, although precisely what these challenges would be is difficult to judge. In my opinion, a thorough consideration of the events of 1999 offers a useful place to start.

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BROTHERS FOREVER. FRATERNAL TIES AND THE DYNAMICS OF OBLIGATION IN ARCTIC RUSSIA

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This ethnographic documentation of a settlement in Arctic Russia demonstrates the role of brotherhood in local institutions, individual decision-making and family- and community-based obligations. It shows how crucial these are for understanding the complex dynamics of power, obligation and identity to distinguish the diverse use of fraternal metaphors in the community in contrast to the national level or state ideology. I start with the premise that the most prevalent and emotionally charged concepts of brotherhood are, in fact, local and are rooted in two social institutions – the institute of "a hunting crew" and the local kinship system(s). Although these two evolved and transformed under the Soviet and post-Soviet state regimes, the principles of social organisation, positioning and obligations, essential for ties between men, persisted. As the kinship relations are transformative, they do not create an immutable basis for kin-based resources. Labour, such as marine hunting, makes such a basis. In individual decision-making, only non-optative relations with parents and siblings matter. In this study, my focus is the influence of male siblings and cousins on a man's actions. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, some families approve of the monetised service in the army as a substitute for family care and subsistence, and men join their siblings and cousins in the army. The study thus shows how the notion of brotherhood impacts individual decision-making and why it is not difficult, metaphorically speaking, to change sealskin- for heavy-duty leather army boots.

KEYWORDS: brotherhood, return, parallel kinship system, marine hunting, Russian Arctic

The events that followed 24 February 2022 in Ukraine prompted me to think about my male interlocutors from the Russian Arctic and their engagement in the armed forces. As their recruitment has been enlisted and conscripted (asserted by state

authorities through a summons; *povestka*), the question of motivation for such action arises. In the Russian (non-indigenous) province, true patriotism is the prime reason mentioned by relatives when explaining why their son, father or brother decided to go to the Ukrainian front voluntarily. The male friend's influence, financial motives and self-realisation are considered secondary, if at all (Sologub 2022). In the early stages of the war, these recruits grounded their decision in the conviction that they would survive and come back; the operation was still perceived as "not a war" and the death – distant, improbable, most unlikely. In Indigenous communities, however, the decision-making follows different rules, and the reasoning may be different. This study looks at how kinship and the concept of brotherhood enter the decision-making process. Although it has nuances, this model can be applied to other decisions, such as a university choice, career or the passing of the day.

I propose thinking about the concept of brotherhood as a leading factor. This is not a fraternal metaphor the state employs to convince men of their obligations towards their homeland. Rather, this is an internal cultural model, deeply rooted in pre-Soviet social relations. Although the understanding and practice of kin have radically changed throughout the last century (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013, 295), kin relations still provide ground for the most relevant, influential and personally meaningful obligations. In an existentially critical situation, they are imperative.

In the local context, the current participation in the armed forces is not easy to overlook. It must be visible in daily interactions that more than a sixth of young adult men under 30 and about a sixth of mature men between 31 and 45[1] have left the village of approx. 425 inhabitants.[2] Although urban and work migration, especially in the former age group, is present, the return is unclear in this case, and contact is limited.

The men who "went there" (as they may say in the online chat in regard to mobilisation to the front) and those who did not can be easily clustered according to their kin identity. It is assumed that non-optative relations may have an influence on the decision-making; in this case, parents and siblings have a word to say. There were cases when parents held back their sons from going. Those who went, however, are often brothers, cousins and uncles with the same kin. Whether or not this fact is used by the subjects within or outside the community to persuade the subjects in one way or another remains beyond the scope of this paper. My focus is on the ties among the men that make the decision feasible and, presumably, the action bearable.

1 These numbers are very rough estimates as of spring 2023. No official statistics are open to the public for obvious reasons. The main wave of recruitment, the only conscription in the region so far, occurred in the autumn of 2022. It counts to ca. 12 men from the location. All other men have been enlisted. Men who are natives of the field site but changed their residence are also included. *Emic*ally, they are perceived as "ours".

2 *Vserossijskaya perepis naseleniya 2020 goda* (All-Russian Population Census of the year 2020) (2020). Federalnaya sluzhba gosudarstvennoj statistiky (Federal State Statistics Service).

Based on my fieldwork, I assume that two important elements provide the building blocks for the brotherhood model: (1) the hunting crew as an important socioeconomic and kin-related unit and (2) a parallel kinship system derived from a belief in the return of the dead. Let me explain the context of these two phenomena and then link them to the current situation.

DISCLAIMER

At the outset, I must mention several important points. I visited the field in person several times (2008, 2010, 2011 and 2014). Due to personal and global circumstances, I have continuously conducted online research since 2015. Therefore, along with the genealogical and community data gathered in person, I regularly consult my partners online, focusing on specific topics we agree on; with their permission, I reflect on the narratives, photographs and videos they send me. I sometimes argue with those partners closest to me, as external pressures inevitably affect our relationships. Moreover, now, at a distance like this, building social relations requires much more work.

The next qualification concerns the protection of my partners. In the field, I always used visual methods of data creation and representation. My interlocutors not only agreed with the collection of visual data but even insisted on it so that their faces and names would never be forgotten; they refused to be anonymised. Today, the situation is rather different, and I am obliged to take extra care so that nothing I write harms their safety; in this text, I will refrain from using personal names, names of the locations and names of the ethnic groups. Thus, I am trying to write about something happening now, despite not being there, something that is very fragile and therefore requires metaphorical language, something that no one has yet had enough distance from. So why write about it at all? The answer is simple. It is impossible not to write. That is how important it is.

SETTING

The study focuses on one seashore settlement in the Russian Arctic with the central subsistence economic activity being marine hunting. Since the establishment of the Soviet administration in the region in 1922 (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013, 15), the local Indigenous population has undergone a radical transition. The collective farm system and consolidation policy (*politika ukrupneniya*; 1933–1955 and 1955–1960 respectively) that prompted sedentarisation and relocation affected the hunting opportunities. Today, local people are also employed in the non-customary, state-owned economy (local school, administration, housing management – electricity,

heating, cleaning) or are officially unemployed. In addition, they are involved in small-scale inland hunting, sea and lake fishing, and bird hunting.

Soviet modernisation and the post-Soviet era have transformed the relationships between the groups and increased overall interethnic interactions (Gray, 2005). The lingua franca is Russian (Morgounova, 2004), with formal education also occurring in Russian. The local people themselves conceive and reflect upon the diverse tonalities of status differentiation based on ethnicity and inhabited space. Although I consider numerous occasions that emerge from this co-existence, in regard to the analysis of the kinship model, I focus on the ethnic majority.

THE CONCEPT OF BROTHERHOOD IN VARIOUS CONTEXTS

The notion of brotherhood is deeply embedded in diverse aspects of social life, spanning across different cultures and eras. In spiritual traditions, it is often contrasted with natural, blood-based relationships. From a Christian theological perspective (Kessler 1987), brotherhood is mainly about shared faith and the collective pursuit of salvation.

In the medieval history of chivalry, two knights in a close relationship are commonly referred to as “brothers-in-arms” (Keen 1962, Pieniadz 2023). This form of brotherhood is both a legal and a profoundly personal bond, rooted in mutual trust and shared values of honour and bravery. In recent history, the brotherhood has also been a rallying cry in labour and civil rights movements, a powerful tool for social justice and community empowerment (see Green 1973 on the brotherhood of timber workers in the southern United States in 1910–1913 and Webb 2012 on the brotherhood of sleeping car porters). Brotherhood has also evolved within consumer culture, tied to notions of masculinity, leisure and recreation and is commodified (Swiencicki 1988).

In the anthropology of rituals, the accent is on how brotherhood is formalised through ritual practice. For example, Ferdinand Okada’s (1957) study on ritual brotherhood in Nepal highlights how these bonds function as cohesive elements within society. Similarly, Arthur Hocart’s (1935) research on blood-brotherhood explores how such practices among the Zande (Azande) people create enduring bonds that resemble familial relationships. Hocart notes that blood brotherhood is not merely symbolic but entails mutual obligations and privileges, including rights to intermarriage and shared responsibilities. According to Christopher Taylor (2024), this form of brotherhood reflects a complex interplay between ritual, social structure and personal relationships.

In my study, the notion of brotherhood is elucidated as a phenomenon closely related to the kinship system, multiple personhoods and social cohesion. As

community is part of a broader social context, local notions of brotherhood intertangle with meanings attributed by the state. The distinction between brotherhood as a metaphor in state ideology and a social phenomenon on the micro-level is crucial. It helps us understand the complex dynamics of power, obligation and identity. Despite the shared terminology, the meanings and obligations at each level can vary significantly.

On the national and state levels, brotherhood is often employed as a metaphor to unify diverse populations under a common identity. These metaphors serve to create a sense of belonging and solidarity among citizens, urging them to perceive their relationship to the state and fellow citizens as akin to familial bonds. The state often mixes paternal, maternal and fraternal metaphors to craft a cohesive national identity, suggesting that the bond between citizens is as natural and unbreakable as that between siblings. The nation is envisioned as a family, and different ethnic groups are seen as brothers within that family. However, this framing can mask underlying power dynamics, where some "brothers" (ethnic groups) are expected to occupy subordinate roles, sacrificing their interests for the greater good of the "family" (nation). This ideology promotes a hierarchical relationship, where unity against external and internal enemies is prioritised, but at the cost of enforcing and perpetuating inequality among different groups. Moreover, use of the fraternal metaphor can also place unrealistic expectations on individuals.

The critical challenge here is recognising the differences in the diverse use of the notions of brotherhood – it is vital to understand the implications of any metaphorical conflations.

This study uniquely focuses on the intimate, personal meanings of brotherhood, providing a fresh perspective on the topic. I have grounded my perspective in an ethnography of the kinship system and daily practices, both spiritual and for subsistence. Only then, based on observations of the social phenomenon, do I turn to the use of fraternal metaphors. But even on such occasions, my primary emphasis will be on the personal and kinship aspects of brotherhood.

HUNTING CREW AS A MODEL OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Kinship relations in the studied community are transformative; they do not create an immutable basis for kin-based resources, labour does (cf. the Iñupiat in Barrow and Wainwright, Alaska; Bodenhorn 2000b, 128). The settlement's long-term key subsistence has been marine hunting. It had always been bound to collective action[3].

3 Although seal, for instance, was hunted individually and distributed within a family, in the wintertime, if needed, seal meat was shared with others (Bogoraz-Tan 1984, 10).

It was regulated through a social organisation based on a particular kinship model. As marine hunting on the open sea is primarily gendered, and the harvesting and butchering are done by men, the focus will be on men's groups. I will show how the recruitment of the hunting crew changed over time, resulting in an increased role in making the men relatives – "brothers".

Throughout the twentieth century, the kinship system transformed repeatedly and radically: from the clan and lineage (1910s–1930s) to (mixed) residential community (1930s–1950s), the nuclear family (1960s) and an extended matrifocal family (led by a widowed or single mother or grandmother since the 1970s–1980s) (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013, 297).

These changes translated into the ways hunting crews were formed. In the 1920s, the hunting crew was formed through lineage. The main decisions about the hunt were taken by elders in the lineage, often older and more experienced men than the boat owner. Before the Soviet modernisation, the composition of the crew was dynamic. If a lineage lacked a sufficient number of adult men, then the crew included more lineages from one clan or all the families, regardless of actual kin ties or the boat owner's affinal relatives from other lineages and clans (e.g., the boat owner's brother-in-law).

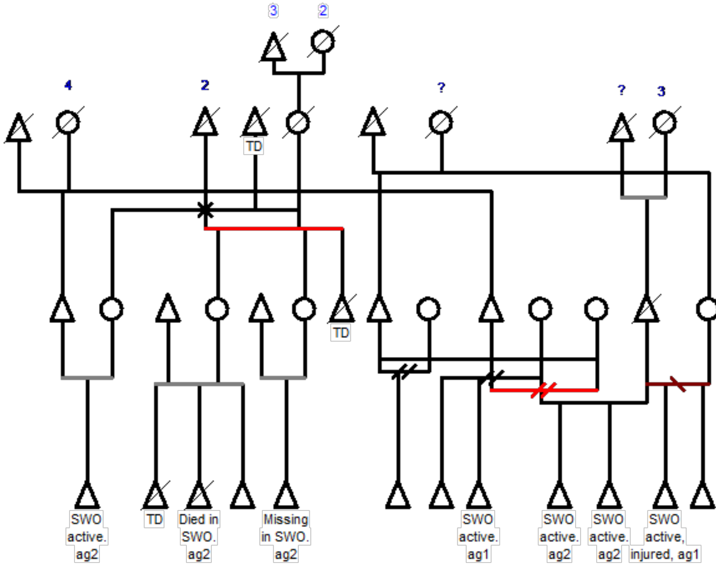
Under the pressure of Soviet policies, such as permanent settlement, controlled housing, relocation and consolidation, many of the foundations of kinship ties appeared obsolete. The significance of kin still persists but it appears as more of a "symbolic social element" (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013, 290); however, in certain contexts, it continues to shape collective action. The division into lineage and territorial groups remains a vital structuring principle of social organisation (Bodenhorn 2000b, 130), whether it concerns hunting, burial places or commemoration rituals.

Scheme 1 demonstrates how the hunters in contemporary hunting crews are recruited and how they are related.

A hunters' crew bound to one whaleboat has persisted as an important symbolic social unit; this is observed also in adjacent seashore communities (Vakhrushev 2006, 126).

In the 1990s, the resumption of crew marine hunting occurred in the settlement, paralleled by a process of reinventing "tradition". After about two decades of industrial hunting and even three decades of completely absent or extremely sporadic crew hunting, two stepbrothers, both descendants of a well-respected hunter, initiated a return to the crew type of marine hunting. Another impulse came from related communities in Alaska; this was possible when the US-Russian border opened in 1988 (see Freeman et al. 1992 and Kishigami 2016 for the same processes in the Arctic).

The significance of the revived whaleboat crew as a social unit, I suggest, is mainly symbolic. The practice of recruiting hunters from extended family or non-relatives



Scheme 1: Kinship ties among men – special military operation (SWO) recruits
This scheme portrays just a few men involved and serves as an example. I built two other schemes with other volunteers. The prevailing relations are brothers, cousins and step-cousins. In the emic understanding, they are simply brothers.
The scheme only shows male offspring in the current generation.
The locus is shown in the oldest generation with a number in blue. If a number is not shown, the men are incomers.
ag+number is the age group to which the person belongs:
born in 1980s
born in 1990s
born in 2020s
TD stands for tragic death.

as opposed to the relatives directly from one's own lineage has become common. In the Canadian Arctic, Nobuhiro Kishigami identifies the same flexibility and finds the reason for the introduction of the quota system by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) (Kishigami 2013, 5). This is not the case, however, in this settlement. The choice of men to join a whaling crew is limited. The official occupational flux might not seem high but the high variety of personal dynamics in crew arrangement is (observation of two hunts in 2010 and 2014); the latter might be connected mainly with the shortage of young men willing to join the organisation

as full-term employees. The insufficient number of hunters may be due to it being a risky, low-paid profession with an insufficient transfer of knowledge and the presence of alcoholism.

The establishment of "territorial-neighbourhood community hunting organisations of the small-numbered Indigenous nations of the north" (*Territorial'no-sosedskaia obshschiny korennykh malochislennykh narodov Severa*)[4] in the 2000s has led to new property relations. These relations are entangled, however, in the former Soviet *sovkhoist* (state farming) practices. On the one hand, boat ownership, which was originally essential for the hunting arrangements, is only formal, at the time of the hunting. In reality, all the devices and gear belong to the municipal organisation sponsored by the regional government. On the other hand, the actual use of the gear goes beyond the organisation's utility; in everyday life, it is used for both private and professional ends. The head of the municipal organisation uses prestige and authority to create the primary hunting crew. His reputation now does not depend solely on the skills related to hunting, but also on his capacity to communicate the community's needs with the government[5] and acquire as many extra financial resources as possible, for example, through the maritime transportation of guests (e.g., geologists, archaeologists, filmmakers) or tourist hunting expeditions.

To understand decision-making and how kin ties matter, it is important to look at the next step of collective labour – meat distribution. Studying Saqqaq in Northwestern Greenland, Jens Dahl (2000, 177-178) distinguishes sharing as being an integrated part of relations in the production system and, thus, a moral obligation, an exchange in which the distribution of meat gifts is voluntary. Kishigami (2013, 34), writing on Barrow, also describes two kinds of sharing of whale: sharing by rule and voluntary sharing. Barbara Bodenhorn (2000b) writes about large scale sharing based on a generalised exchange and individual sharing based on individual or marital decisions, in which relatives are expected to share but it is not predetermined. In the settlement under study, the system of sharing is open, in the sense that men of any kin background are allowed to enter the hunting crews. Thus, the catch is not distributed within a single kin group but is dispersed among the majority of the community members. The share is compensation for what the hunter has invested in the hunt; this is mostly his skills, as the tools and gear are ascribed to an

4 This status is further described in the Civil Code of the Russian Federation (Grazhdanskij kodeks Rossijskoj federacii), Article 123.16 (part I, 30 November 1994 N 51-FZ, amended on 8 August 2024. Changed 31 October 2024). The detailed information on the communal organization is given in the Registry of Businesses and Organizations. Rusprofile. 2023. "TSO KMNS 'Chaplino'."

5 It is done in cooperation with the authorised representative of the district's head of administration. In 2010, the leading hunter's brother-in-law took this post; in 2014, the leading hunter's wife assumed the position.

individual but represent the property of the hunting organisation. Entitlement for a share is not determined by kinship or marital connections.

Nevertheless, the amount and the quality of the share varies. A successful crew does not exclusively own the whale meat. All the hunters who took part in the hunt, towing as well as other men (individual helpers – non-hunters or hunters who for certain reasons did not take part in the hunt) who assisted in carving up the animal, get their share. Today's harvesting process is very similar to that described by Kishigami regarding the community in Barrow (2016, 50-51). Sharing during the butchering follows standardised practices. All the men who participate in the hunt and whale harvesting receive a share of meat and a share of whale blubber. Some hunting trips are done in cooperation with the members of other communities. The guests may assist in the process of butchering the meat, but their role may be of minor importance. For instance, in 2010, one crew from another village assisted in whale harvesting and butchering. Ultimately, each hunter took home two regular shopping bags filled with meat and blubber. Even if unrelated in terms of kinship, these men have the right to put forward a claim generated through their labour.

Villagers who come to the shore where the whale is butchered weigh the meat and blubber they wish to have and pay for the items in the village (the payment is not for the marine product itself as, according to the IWC license, this is forbidden, but for the costs of the actual hunting, such as fuel and equipment). The baleen, walrus tusk and walrus penis are the subject of the grey economy. The successful hunter decides who gets it, assuming that the item will be sold for money, and he will get the share. Community feasts or feasts in the captain's house are not strategies employed for sharing in this community. Most community events, even if they include "native food", are sponsored by the district government and are highly formal. As mentioned above, immutable ties (spouses, parents) do not suggest that the individual is obliged to reciprocate the meat or money earned in the hunting. Yet, sharing this with optative relatives is expected. If they are recruited, for instance, as brothers through friendship (relatives not affirmed through birth), sharing is welcome.

Additionally, the system of sharing is comprised of voluntary, rather informal sharing. Voluntary sharing supports the assumption that close kin must be available as a source of altruism (e.g., Lee and DeVore 1968) and, thus, provides sufficient adaptivity for the kin group. This is also true with respect to marine products, although they are not necessarily essential to today's subsistence. The benefits of sharing comprise of much broader realm of services and items than marine meat. It is also important to consider the social costs of *not* giving (Mauss 1925): loss of reputation or even exclusion from the community might be the case.

Both strategies, formal and voluntary, enable highly valued resources culturally, such as marine products, to be distributed efficiently to a whole community

(Fienup-Riordan 1983; Bodenhorn 2000a, 2000b; Kishigami 2013) and levelling the amount of consumption and possession of marine products among local households, contributing to community well-being and unity (Evaloardjuk et al. 2004).

The system of sharing the catch transforms into other types of sharing (other food provision and security or childcare) and is bound to specific types of social and genealogical relations. Genealogical relatedness and residence play important roles in sharing (Betzig and Turke 1986). In the community, these two intersect. If some people move from the village to the town, people try to find ways to overcome the extra distance and provide benefits to close relatives. This is complicated by the limited transport infrastructure, transport costs, dangerous environment and longevity of the marine products. Therefore, food-sharing households are more closely related genealogically than any other households in the population at large. More food is shared within the community than between the settlements. The costs for extra distance must be compensated for by the genealogical relatedness. An in-kind return gift is never a certainty; a person minimises the risk of loss by investing in related individuals (see, e.g., Essock-Vitale and McGuire 1980, 1985).

In exchanges between individuals of two adjacent villages who are not relatives, the flow of items or services is supported because both actors find them scarce and value them highly. The capacity of such an exchange, even outside of kin, is an important factor in the development of the ranked and stratified society. Interfamilial differentiation of occupations and subsistence patterns also belong to these conditioning factors in the ranking of maritime food-gatherers (Watanabe 1983, 217).

In exchanges between relatives and non-relatives, products other than “native food” must be subject to a gift. Soviet modernisation led to a new understanding of categories such as personal, private and public property; to a certain extent, these persist to the present day. The flow of property from the collective to the personal – “popular redistribution” – is a common practice; Konstantinov (2015, 17) uses the terms “bottom-up redistribution” and “vernacular redistribution”. In the 1990s, for instance, employees of a fox farm consumed fish designated for foxes or exchanged them with relatives and non-relatives for other products. Morally, it was justified by the state’s inadequate food supply in the northern territories as well as by the fact that the fox farms were to be put out of service soon anyway. The blurry boundary between personal and public equipment, such as snowmobiles or whaleboats, lingers under the new hunting organisation; in this case, their use for private purposes is justified by the needs of the local community. The kickback from deliveries or projects has remained a regular transfer of goods or benefits from public to private hands; this practice is usually monetised. For instance, a portion of rubbing alcohol, delivered to the peninsula as disinfectants and antiseptics for medical clinics, is sold privately to substance abusers. These arrangements have become embedded in the existing

system of kin relationships and distribution and have triggered additional informal models of exchange in everyday life.

KIN AND "PARALLEL KIN" AS A MODEL OF INTERNAL BONDS

My perspective on the phenomenon of brotherhood through social organisation and local kinship model(s) must be further expanded by the analysis of what I call *parallel kin*. Such kin stems from the animistic belief in the *return* and is closely related to the Indigenous naming system, especially the acquisition of personal- and a dead person's name(s).

Becoming a "real" person is marked by naming (vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006). As Kishigami states, naming serves to classify or identify individuals and is a part of the worldview conception[6] and social structures[7] (Kishigami 1997, 151). The naming mechanism reflects a circular conception of the universe divided into two modes, natural and supernatural, where an interchange of the living and the dead constantly takes place (Hamayon 1990; Bodenhorn 2000a). The notion of a return, present in both systems, stems from the principle of horizontal connectedness and interaction throughout the cosmos (Turner 1994) and equally concerns human beings and animals, such as whales or seals (Rasmussen 1929, 55–59).

When a person dies, a certain notion of the personhood (locally not always understood as a soul)[8] is surrendered to be returned, and this is secured by the name given to the new-born descendants; this may happen five times at most. I use the emic term "the return" (*vozvrashschenie*) used in the Russian language (the *lingua franca* of the region), rather than reincarnation or rebirth, to mark the importance for the local people of the decisive role of ancestors in the movement of this cycle.[9]

6 Cf. Wachtmeister 1956; Fienup-Riordan 1983.

7 Cf. Heinrich 1969; Guemple 1965, 1972; Saladin d'Anglure 1970, 1994.

8 In my research on the *return*, I draw on the study of Mark Nuttall (1994) on the acquisition of a dead person's name in the Upernavik district of northwest Greenland. Here the *return* is materialised in the name, which "upon death leaves the body and remains 'homeless' until it is called back to reside in the body of a newborn child" (Nuttall 1994, 123). In contrast to the term *name-soul* (Nuttall 1994, 123) or *recycled name-souls* (Schweitzer and Golovko 1997, 170), I employ the term "returned name" or "shared name" mostly as the term "soul" is viewed as Christian by the locals. The name is regarded as a social and spiritual component of the person, something that is closely connected with the other spiritual components of the soul and the breath soul (spirit). The local ontology of soul, spirit and personhood indeed deserves a separate study.

9 Rane Willerslev (2009) uses the term "rebirth" for the dead coming back to life through their newborn descendants and the term "return" for the living leaving this world for the realm of the dead. This logic follows the hierarchical order, in which the dead stand higher than the living. I shall use the emic term

The locals explain the deceased person in a newborn as being "the one who has returned". A deceased person in a dream guides the living: "I will come back in your child." Besides dreams, other ways of knowing who is to come back in a newborn baby include divination, elders' advice or birth circumstances. It is also possible that the name of a returned ancestor is long unknown, and the child may grow up without it, using only the Russian first name.

The return of the deceased has a specific reference to a particular person. The naming pattern does not restrict itself to the use of the same name in alternating generations (grandparents and grandchildren), to gender or even to a relative (return of non-relatives or animals is common). Numerous informants told me that the person can have several local names (even names to mislead the bad spirits) but "only those names are real, which have already been used" (i.e. "the returned"). The continuity of the names makes material the circulation of the living. During the Soviet era, the naming became more complicated. Without diverging into another subject, it is worth mentioning that on an official level (birth certificate, IDs, etc.), local people started naming their children with Russian first names, adopted patronyms and made-up surnames (the first surnames usually come from the first names of the father or mother). The returned name has persisted as an inner, more intimate name.

The *return* of a dead person's name (Nuttall 1994, 123) does not just play an important role in preserving the notion of ancestorship, it is not only directed towards the past. The dead person's name has an impact on a living person's genealogical and social identity without, however, giving a person implicit instruction on how to act. Local children learn the identities of those people who returned through them. The children equally acquire knowledge of the various relationships that link them to an intricate pattern of *genealogical* and *affinal* kin. Kin relationships by name are often extended beyond one's own lineage, however. Therefore, they encompass a wider network of people and may include broader relations of solidarity. Nevertheless, different names can lead to contested identities: a person, while being him or herself, is nonetheless regarded as a returned deceased relative. These multiple names and identities pose a question as to how possible singularisation of a person's identity is and whether it is at all necessary. Perhaps there are multiple selves of a "dividual" (Strathern 1988).

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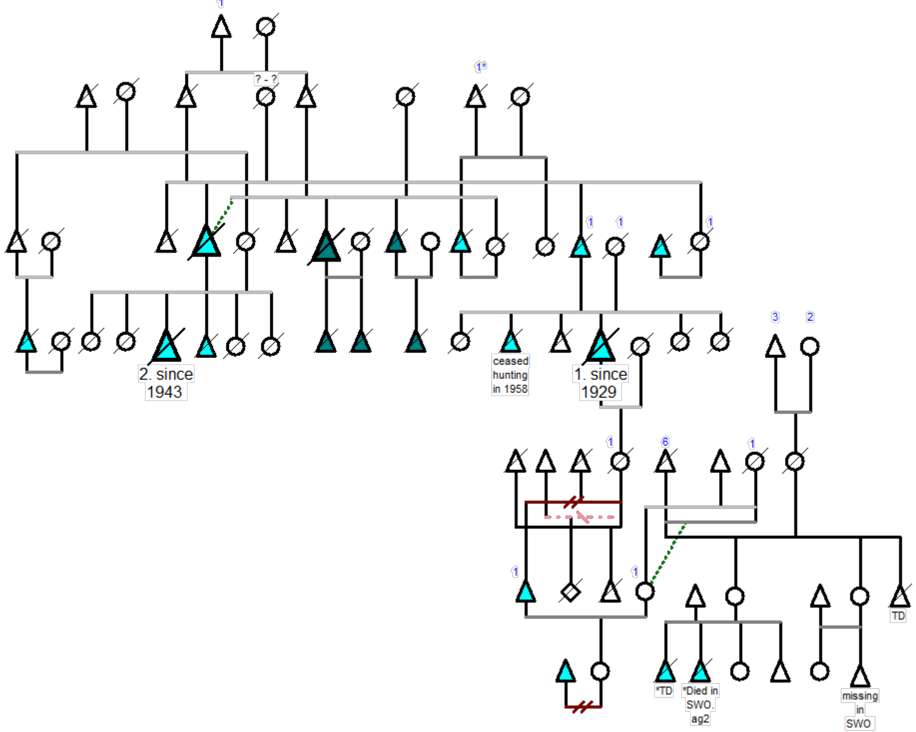
return, which might change the perspective, from the view of someone who is still alive. Life is then seen as something that is worth postponing. If, however, the reunion with deceased relatives is idealised, such postponement makes no sense. The distinction between fearing the dead, fearing death and longing to return to deceased relatives can then be easily blurred. This, in turn, raises numerous questions on how the phenomenon of *return/rebirth* (Nuttall 1994; Bodenhorn 2000a) affects people's lives, including someone's decision to stay alive or, by contrast, commit suicide.



Scheme 2: Role of kinship in the formation of a hunting crew
The enlarged gender symbol shows the lead hunter. In the 1920s–1940s generation, two crews are shown in two colours: turquoise and petroleum green. In 1958, many hunters ceased hunting and were forced to shift to construction work. The men in the next generation ceased crew hunting due to the introduction of industrial hunting.
The offspring of the lead hunter 1 form today hunting crew 1, always marked turquoise, whereas the offspring of the lead hunter 2 now form hunting crew 2, not shown here.
**Not from locus 1 but related to the lead hunter through a step-aunt.*
1 He was originally from a different locus but identified with a new one through his foster father.*

This complex social classification preserves the bond between the dead and the living and produces additional affiliations among the living. It provides a subject with a set of extra social bonds (and obligations) based on parallel kin ties. One such additional affiliation may be brotherhood.

Consider this example (Scheme 2): X returned for the first time in 1 (deceased nephew to X). Then he returned in the same year through 2 (alive, first cousin twice

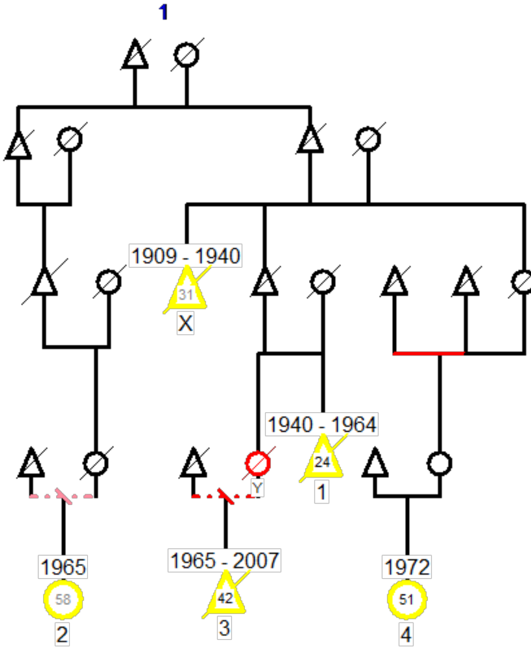
removed to X) and 3 (deceased, grandnephew to X). In seven years, X supposedly came back again with the birth of 4 (alive, grandniece to X). She is already the fourth person to return and to hold the name X. The circulation of the living mentioned above is made evident by the continuity of the name.

Even more crucial for understanding the model of brotherhood is the fact that this name transmission puts several individuals in close social associations, such as namesake relations (Kishigami 1997, 154). For those who come from the same regular kin group, this extra tie provides them with a set of additional bonds and obligations. One person can come back through several persons, even peers – what are called *name-sharers* (Kishigami 1997, 154). In the above example, all the name-sharers come from the same locus, but this might not always be the case.

Subjects 2, 3 and 4 are all holders of the name X and name-sharers in a namesake relation (Kishigami 1997, 154). This name-sharing inspires a specific mode of classification; in addition to the genealogical system, there is another system of relationships by name which extends beyond genealogical kin to encompass a wider social network of people. The three persons may address each other using either a regular kinship term, for example, 2 addresses 4 as "(third) cousin", or they could use just "X", referring to a namesake term as they are "buddies" sharing the name of the returned uncle X (cf. formal and skewed kinship terms in Kishigami 1997, 155; and voluntary in Guemple 1965, 331). They are of similar age, so the name-sharing would suggest but not oblige them towards mutual care, help, and gift-giving.

Besides buddies, the returned name also prompts brotherhood ("by addition", not through the same parent) as it confers a social identity on the person who, while being himself or herself, is simultaneously regarded as a returned deceased relative. According to Scheme 3, Y had a patrilineal uncle X, a brother 1, and a son 3; that is what the "regular" kinship system demonstrates. In the system of relations set by the returned name, Y's son was at the same time her patrilineal uncle and brother. So, there might have been a life situation, in which 1 is reminded of himself through 3, that is 3 acted as if he was 1; Y then could address 3 with the word "Bro", not "Son".

And yet, there is nothing implicit in naming that informs people how to act; individuals are autonomous in their agency. Although all the individuals who hold the same returned name, as mentioned above, may also share some personal traits that resemble X, they have their distinct personalities and biographies. Shared names do not determine people's personality, they are rather reference points in a complex network of interpersonal relationships amongst persons, both living and dead. There is a vast room for particularity, which can be expressed through individual skills, conduct and dispositions ("excellent hunter", "cheerful kind of guy", "mother of ten children, out of whom four died tragically"). At the same time, the persons who share the same returned name might have



Scheme 3: Brotherhood by addition through the returned name.

a different position in the parallel kinship system; hence, their obligations and affiliations towards their relatives differ.

As shown, naming mechanisms play a significant role in the context of multi-layered individual, communal and ethnic identities. The concept of *return* invokes parallel kinship relations, including name-sake relations, affiliations beyond kin and wide social networks. The returned name can thus put several men in close social association. In addition to consanguinity and genealogy of the locus, there is another system of relationships – genealogy based on the "returned" name(s). It spans a broader social network of people and, hence, creates additional networks of brotherhood.

CONCLUSION

The enormous stress of the last century has led to a multilayered system of formal and informal rules that involve local kin as well as Soviet and post-Soviet regulations and informalities. As the two examples of a hunting crew and the returned

name elucidate, the transition must be seen under the light of continuity, not as an abrupt change. Despite the radical changes in the social structure, kinship ties can still facilitate mutual reciprocity. Equally so, however, proximity is produced through labour. Both patterns, hunting crews embedded in the current socioeconomic dynamics and name-sharing – in the parallel kinship system – translate into models of brotherhood.

Despite their multiple affiliations, individuals can act as independent agents; their decision-making is autonomous, but it does not happen in a boundless vacuum. My study shows that the brother has a crucial impact on man's choice-making.

The recruitment to become one's brother cannot be reduced to individuals who belong to each other by virtue of being born to the same mother, by adoption by the same person or by an acknowledged sexual union outside of marriage. The ties occurring through a hunting crew and name-sharing may bring up a brotherhood of equal significance. They also fall into the non-optative kinship sphere (Heinrich 1963 as cited in Bodenhorn 2000b, 136), their relatedness cannot be denied without incurring social disapproval.

Based on my experience, we can also add a brother by friendship to this list of recruitment possibilities. It is not yet another descriptive category but a powerful bond with significant moral content. It is neither a tight friendship, "best buddies" in the European sense, nor a brotherhood-like bond enforced through a criminal act (Ben-Yehoyada, 2022). Even if these close friends are not immediate relatives, they always agree they must be kin-related in such a small-numbered community. What is decisive is that this category brings along numerous moral commitments.

A close affinity between men may result in cooperation, such as hunting, fishing, car repair and construction (a garage being a local men's club), and setting up a casual job for a pal. Brothers share names from their families (both regular names and returned names) and give them to their brother's children. Childcare, joint hunting and the sharing of political standpoints also fall within the expectations of this relationship. As the men – women's relationships might not always saturate the emotional intimacy (except perhaps mother-son relationships), the relationship with "my bro" and "my buddy" also allows for intimate talks or advice.

Manly togetherness is also associated with addiction. "Brothers" can become, for instance, alcoholics together: "K. started in the company of alcoholic friends, perhaps he was subconsciously attracted to those people who were drinking and to alcohol itself. He then said, 'I've had enough of those who drink, they are as weak as me, I cannot help them,' and he was able to quit" (F., 2014).

Brotherhood is a heavily emotionally charged relationship, as is evident in the case of liminal experiences. If the two men want to end their lives, they do it together or soon after each other. It is also not rare that when a man dies, of addiction or not,

the other one follows him, committing suicide. At the same time, if one of the buddies is older or more experienced and decides to stay sober, this role modelling can encourage his brother to also quit: "When there is stimulation, there is no risk of drinking. Like S., he took me as a role model, saw that without drinking one can buy a car, a motorcycle or a scooter. So he managed to quit" (V., 2014).

The two models presented in the paper may serve as explanatory tools with certain limitations: an in-depth ethnography of the organising principles embedded in the two local institutions does not say how exactly these principles lead to certain observable actions or behaviours. In this effort to understand how local men make decisions today regarding their lives, whether their collective participation in state-prompted events, shared private business in the city, local marine mammal hunting or something else, it is necessary to engage the principles of brotherhood not only through obligations towards the kin but also through the perspective of intimacy and emotion.

It is precisely because of the interplay of emotions and individually perceived obligations that the metaphors used by the state to promote a unified national identity do not automatically resonate with the same meaning at the micro-level. People's understanding of brotherhood within their families or communities may not translate directly to their perception of national or military brotherhood. Points of tension occur when individuals and communities reflect on (or even question) the ways in which the State extends familial obligations to the national level.

The state's emphasis on family values, however, can contribute to a situation where individuals feel trapped by their obligations, leading to frustration, even aggression. The state may demand loyalty, sacrifice and even self-subordination by framing these demands as natural extensions of familial duty or kinship-like obligations one owes to one's family. For instance, "going against the nation" can be equated to abandoning one's family, thereby stigmatising dissent or the desire for emancipation from domination as a violation of deeply ingrained moral duties. In some cases, the increasing intrusion of state ideology into private life exacerbates these tensions, leading to domestic violence, substance abuse and other forms of dysfunction that reflect broader societal pressures.

The violence within kinship relations mirrors broader societal violence enacted by the state. This cycle of violence reflects the deep entanglement between personal and political spheres, where the pressures of national ideology seep into and distort intimate relationships. From this perspective, an individual can find the link between a kin brother, a nation-brother and a brother-in-arms congruent. In making choices, the shift, metaphorically speaking, from sealskin- to heavy-duty leather army boots, from family care to service to the state, may not seem perplexing.

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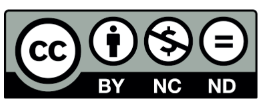

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THE MINDFUL BODY AND GEOPOLITICAL EMBODIMENT DURING THE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

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In this article, I argue that the war between Russia and Ukraine has "geopolitical embodiment", meaning personal bodily experiences that people associate with inter-state relations. In this case, the embodiment includes the "imprints" of feelings, moral sentiments, memories and relations connected with nation-states and their political relations. The "mindful body" theory (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) allows me to continue their metaphorical conceptualisation and talk about the "geopolitical body". When approaching the topic, I explored the stories of four Russian citizens who experienced Russia's invasion of Ukraine painfully. Ukraine was an integrated part of their personal, social and geopolitical space. They were strongly against the invasion and talked about changes in their lives and bodies that they attributed to the war: social fragmentation and physical sickness experienced as corporeal disintegration. To resist it and recollect their social and corporeal unity, they left Russia soon after the war began. Speaking about their experiences, they also represented their post-Soviet geopolitical subjectivities.

KEYWORDS: war, narratives, embodiment, disintegration, violence, resistance, mobility

INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, the Russian state started the so-called special military operation (SVO – in Russian) – *spetsialnaya voennaya operatsiya* the term used by the Russian government against the state of Ukraine[1]. After this, one could almost physically feel that life would never be the same in Russia. Laughing students, foreign tourists, people in military

1 The term "special military operation" is manipulative. It presents the war as a local military conflict. Simultaneously, Russian officials present it as a global confrontation between Russia and the collective West. Navaro-Yashin stresses that the production of confusion can be seen as a special tactic (2002, 175).

uniforms, all these people on the streets of Russian cities were no longer perceived neutrally. The public space changed overnight: it became framed by the context of war. "How can the students dare arrange their graduation party," my colleague wondered. In her opinion, it is unethical to have parties while the war is going on. Foreign tourists also became a matter of discussions: "How could these Europeans come here considering the international air traffic blockade? Or maybe they are not tourists?" I was looking at the lonely figure of a middle-aged man in a military uniform as he waited for somebody at the door of a military office. "What does he feel being in the street among laughing young people who deliberately ignore him? Did he come from 'there'?" In Saint Petersburg, which I had become familiar with in recent years, there are many military establishments – schools and working units. I had noticed earlier but was only now conscious of them. I see the war beamed down to the city from billboards with images of happy young soldiers in modern army equipment, advertising the military as "a real man's job". They invite men to join the *SVOji* (ours) and promise significant financial compensation. Everywhere, the war has tuned the vision of public life in today's Russia. Even fine art exhibitions that, I suppose, were planned long ago, are seen as pro or contra the war.

At the very beginning of the war, many people in Russia were shocked regardless of their attitudes towards the war (Erpyleva and Savelieva 2022, 54, 141, 200). Some opponents left the country immediately, driven by their "emotions" (Rapoport 2023), especially in the metropolitan area (Exodus-22 2023); others protested, with the most active brutally punished by the authorities. Later, strong emotions became more subdued, and the situation seemed to be normalised[2]. However, this process is better described as "privatisation" as opposed to normalisation – sensitive political topics confined to face-to-face encounters. Street conversations, neighbourhood talks and travel companions bring people back to the theme of war. People express their opinions in private discussions: they complain that they cannot understand who are "us" and who are "them". Other people express anti-military sentiments, declaring themselves pacifists in a whispered voice – the excuse for their disagreement or not following the official agenda[3]. While some Russian inhabitants supported the war and even joined it, even those who did not condemn the invasion understood that something odd was happening.[4]

2 Navaro-Yashin writes about normalisation as a pushing to the back of public consciousness and forgetting (2002, 175). I would add here that the Russian state normalises this new war in everyday social and political order through the normalisation of bodies in everyday behaviour (cf. Asad 2003, 104).

3 My interviewee Alina (woman, 64, left Russia in 2023) believed that in saying "We are pacifists", people are trying to avoid uncomfortable thoughts about the war. I myself noticed that the reference to pacifism often marked a war opponent's unwillingness to discuss the conflict with strangers or war supporters. I also learned this trick helped to avoid unproductive discussions.

4 The video *The Publicity Booth* about life in Kostroma, a regional capital in central Russia, demonstrates how the town's inhabitants show their attitude to the war by avoiding the topic, both euphemistically and directly (Otdeljnaia Tsivilizatsija 2022, Erpyleva and Savelieva 2022).

I am writing this text a year and a half after the beginning of the war, and the topic has permeated the fabric of everyday life in Russia ever since. Terrifying war news enters people's homes daily. The Russian-speaking media discusses the battlefield in Ukraine, trials stamping out dissent, corruption scandals at the highest echelons of the military and so on. The degree of tension is high. Within this highly uncertain militarised context, there are also voices which strongly oppose the war.

War is a social institution "made on bodies" (Baker 2020, 1). It is an institutionalised and structured violence against human bodies that injures, disintegrates, kills and collects them for burying, mostly in performative ways. Besides the immediate visible damage, it also causes postponed pain and suffering to those that survive and that may stay hidden without the help of special research (e.g., Clarkin 2019). Displacement and disorientation are two of the most significant after-effects of military conflict on the bodies of people (e.g., Dunn 2017). The current war between Russia and Ukraine has both these aspects – visible and hidden. The media show the setting for consuming human bodies in Ukrainian territories in a brutal and performative way via attacks on both military and civilian objects. The invisible embodied experiences of aggression in this war are awaiting more systematic reporting, although researchers have already begun to focus on this (Pietrzak 2022, Tsymbalyuk 2023, Burlyuk and Misliu 2023, Hendl et al. 2023). At the same time, we do not pay much attention to the bodies of people who are physically on the territory of the aggressor, that is to say, distantly or passively involved in the military actions. They participate in the war discourses and everyday practices of the aggressor state via its legislation, news and conversations, processing all of these with their bodies.

I initiated this project because of my own traumatic perception of the war against Ukraine. My research question arose from my reflections on Russia's geopolitical ambitions. The Russian state regularly waged local wars, especially in post-Soviet territory. I had the impression that people in Russia experienced them rather distantly. The war against Ukraine in 2022, on the contrary, appeared to be extremely close. People around me experienced it emotionally and painfully. Why was this war particular for the people of Russia? What meanings did it convey for them? How did they experience this war *through*, *between* and in *between* their bodies (cf. Dyvik and Greenwood 2018; Baker 2020, 5; Narozhna 2021)?

To approach this topic, I collected the personal stories of nine people with a strong anti-war position, two men and seven women of different generations and social positions. I asked them about their relation to Ukraine and what they did, thought and felt before, during and after Russia's full-scale invasion of the country. I also asked them about their bodily experiences when the war started. Further questions of mine did not follow any strict inquiry. They depended upon the personal circumstances of the interviewees. Recorded between spring 2022 and autumn 2023, four of the interviews took place in Russia, four abroad and one online. All

my interviewees lived in Moscow or Saint Petersburg before the war. Therefore, they can be considered privileged citizens with regard to their metropolitan economic, cultural and social resources and university education. Some had dual citizenship beyond their Russian nationality, whereas others had long-stay visas in the Schengen Area that allowed them to travel between Russia and other countries. All of them also had strong and weak ties beyond Russia, including relatives, friends and colleagues.

To answer my questions, firstly, I focus on the embodiment of geopolitics and the geopolitical body. I then introduce four narratives of one man and three women – Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina.[5] Kirill's story was about public protests. Julia based her narrative on her Russo-Ukrainian family identity. In turn, Inna and Katerina somehow shared similar circumstances of international mobility, living partly in Russia and partly abroad. Mobility emerged as a crucial aspect of the corporeal experience of the war for all my interlocutors. Consequently, the fourth part of this study focuses on the mobility that provided a sense of relief and an opportunity to renegotiate the geopolitical bodies of my interlocutors. In the last section, I will present general conclusions.

EMBODIMENT OF GEOPOLITICS AND THE GEOPOLITICAL BODY

I often hear people justify the current war between Russia and Ukraine by presenting the Russian state's geopolitical needs as an objective necessity: "NATO approached Russia's borders too closely" or "Russia needed the Sevastopol naval base for its security" (cf. Hendl et al. 2023, 181, 186). In this way, they take the aggressor's side of violence and political domination instead of the rules of formal equality between sovereign states (cf. Rytövuori-Apunen 2020, 5). In this article, I argue that the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine does not exist as geopolitical objectivity; instead, I want to highlight that this war has geopolitical embodiment in people who associate themselves with Russia (both as citizens or as permanent inhabitants). Therefore, I follow a feminist argument that disembodied geopolitical discussions about the Russian invasion of Ukraine are far from the embodied experiences of those who suffer. Limited by abstract political theory, they create a gap in knowledge production about the war (cf. Burlyuk and Misliu 2023; Hendl et al. 2023; Tsymbalyuk 2023).

Geopolitics as knowledge has its roots in geography that started as "*an active writing of the earth by an expanding, centralizing imperial state*" (Ó Tuathail 1996, 1; italics in original). The institutionalisation of geography provided an "unprecedented

5 I want to thank all my interlocutors from the bottom of my heart for their contribution to this uneasy topic. To protect their identities here and elsewhere, I have given them pseudonyms and withheld details that might reveal their identity.

program of imperial expansionism and territorial acquisition" through science, education and propaganda and constituted a "geopolitical tradition" (Ó Tuathail 1996, 16). Geopolitics produces governmental practices of territorialisation and "technologies of power concerned with the governmental production and management of territorial space" (Ó Tuathail 1996, 5; see also Foucault 2012). Today, discussions on geopolitics, both professional and popular, are about international relations, danger and security; the territorial interests of states; military invasions and warfare and, in a broader sense, geo-power and world order (Ó Tuathail 1996; Dittmer and Sharp 2014). Critical geopolitics considers that they often represent the interests of ruling elites (Sharp 1993, 492-493; Tsygankov 2003, 102-103). Geopolitical knowledge produces geopolitical discourses, meanings and identities that are politically engaged but detached from people's lived reality and disembodied (Hendl et al. 2023, 186).

As posited by Gerard Toal (2017, 13), geopolitics may be defined as a culture that is "experienced, understood and practiced". It concerns the delineation of territorial entities, the demarcation of boundaries of identities, the differentiation of and positioning within the broad civilisational realm, and the categorisation of states as either allies or adversaries. In Toal's words "state elites debate geopolitical visions and orientations within an international arena characterized by competing as well as shared myths, norms, and discourse"; geopolitical myths, in turn, create "coherence, structure, and identity for a community" and "help establish boundaries within and between communities;" within communities they are shared via "power networks" (2017, 41). Geopolitical myths and narratives can also be experienced both affectively and as a "slow phenomenon", "for example, nostalgia for a lost order such as the Soviet Union. It can involve embodied experiences of vulnerability, passivity, suffering, fatigue" (Toal 2017, 45; see also Oushakine 2009). Following Toal's and other embodiment studies in geopolitics and anthropology (e.g. Haldrup et al. 2008 or Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), I suggest that geopolitics as a culture also has an everyday bodily dimension.

In anthropology, the assumption that the physical body is always informed with and informed about its cultural status was proposed by Mauss (1973). This idea of cultural, social and political awareness of the body was developed further (Douglas 1996; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Scheper-Hughes and Lock wrote about the "mindful body" and argued that "humans find the body 'good to think with'," and it "may be used as a cognitive map to represent natural, supernatural, social, and even spatial relations" (1987, 18-19). Geopolitics, therefore, also has its embodiment in individual bodies. In my view, "geopolitical embodiment" refers to the personal bodily experiences, perceptions, representations, awareness and expressions associated to inter-state relations. In this context, embodiment encompasses "imprints" of memories, discourses and multiple social relations, as well as feelings

and sentiments towards nation-states and their political relations. These intersect with class, gender, ethnicity and citizenship. The embodiment of sentiments, discourses and relations regarding international relations shape individuals' "geopolitical bodies".

What does Russian geopolitical culture look like though? What visions, orientations, myths, norms, narratives and discourses does it reproduce? Three narratives – about the territory, the population and the mission of the Russian state – attract attention (cf. Guseinov 2005, 56). The first, territorial narrative emphasises Russia's uniqueness "as a country of great width in terms of its Eurasian landmass" (Rytövuori-Apunen 2020, 4; cf. Tsygankov 2003, 106). It represents Russia's greatness as a natural result of geographical and historical processes and denies its colonial and imperial character. The huge territory poses a security dilemma due to its long border (Rytövuori-Apunen 2020, 4), and guarding it is a special topic within the narrative about the territory. Popular culture conveys this to the general public, in the form of children's books on border security for example (see Detskii sait n.d.). Consequently, the integrity of Russia and the openness of its borders are two major topics in current popular geopolitical discussions (cf. Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010, 668). In turn, the disintegration of the country or separation of its parts is seen as unnatural, catastrophic and a result of plotting enemies (Guseinov 2005, 56). With regards to the second narrative about the population, the problem of ethnicity has been in focus since the Soviet nation-building campaigns (see Slezkine 1994). The ideas and slogans about the unity of the Soviet people ("the USSR is a family of nations"; "Belarus, Russia and Ukraine are three brotherly nations" – Miller 2003; Slezkine 1994) co-existed with the topic of Russian diversity. The people's rights to sovereignty is an extremely sensitive topic in political discourses to this day. Combined with recent topics about labour immigration, they feed geopolitical argumentation depending on the discussion. The third, missionary narrative, roughly divides discussants into "Westerners" and supporters of the "Russian idea" (Levkievskaya 2005, 180). While "Westerners" emphasise Russia's similarities with Western countries and promote European values (Tsygankov 2003, 107; Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010, 668), the official propaganda uses a "civilisationist" rhetoric that outlines Russia's exclusive role in the decolonisation of colonised nations and in rescuing and protecting them from Nazism or fascism. This gives Russia the leading role in the civilisational struggle for "traditional values" against "Western values" (Edenborg 2017, 76, 89; cf. Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010, 669-670; Toal 2017, 43). It is important to consider that the Russian state here finds its mandate to wage war in carrying out this mission (Guseinov 2005, 61). These three grand narratives are represented by smaller discussions. They are disseminated by the media, public persons and social networks and, further, among other people to the "unconscious

domain of the political" (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 5). All three themes are in use in propaganda and popular discussions about the current war between Russia and Ukraine. They also shape the geopolitical bodies of my interlocutors – people sharing this Russian cultural background.

FOUR VIOLATED BODIES WITHIN A GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT

The Protesting Body and Spaces of Resistance

My first interviewee was Kirill whom I met outside Russia three months after the war began. He was a man of about 30 who came from a metropolitan area. Before 24 February 2022, he had a plan to defend his PhD dissertation. The wave of recent events had not broken his long-term plans. Nonetheless, in light of the developments, he and his girlfriend had had to review their short-term arrangements. They soon decided to leave Russia. Although Kirill was officially declared unfit for military service, he moved abroad together with other men – relatives and friends – due to the panic and rumours concerning mobilisation. After some drifting about, he settled in a post-Soviet country. Kirill's girlfriend joined him later.

The events of February 2022 were a milestone for Kirill. The young man was sure he did not have much time to think about the political situation and hardly remembered what was happening to him before this date. Yet, he closely followed the news on 22 February 2022 when Russia recognised the Donetsk and Lugansk Republics. He was waiting for the subsequent declaration of war, but it did not come, and he relaxed: "Like a weight had been lifted off my chest." He believed in a peaceful diplomatic resolution to the conflict. However, soon a proper war began without a declaration. Thus, Kirill's proper story about his war experience began with his reaction that it was necessary "to do something – to protest against it". Through social networks chat forums, he learned that his friends had organised a group and were actively discussing their actions moving forward; he joined them to coordinate the protests.

Kirill and his girlfriend were strongly against the war and, at the very beginning, participated in the protests against it. Kirill's story anticipated the relations between active citizens and the state that developed later. The situation was changing rapidly in the first days of the conflict. Discussions then took place between relatives and close friends. The first meeting was peaceful and well-coordinated – he and his friends were in control of the situation. It resembled a festival: people gathered and walked around, Kirill and his friends met their parents, younger and older generations demonstrated in solidarity. As well as going to meetings, young people made leaflets and distributed them around the city centre. Soon after, unfamiliar people joined the group, and their activity seemed suspicious and intimidating to Kirill. The protests began to feel less organised and safe. Later, police got involved.

Although the police remained neutral, the protesters anticipated their intervention. Kirill and his friends tried to stay away from the crowd, pretending to be just passersby. At the next protest, people started running away from the police. Kirill did not understand why people were running, expecting violence, if the police did not act. Nevertheless, he and his girlfriend ran together with them. Things soon got out of hand, and the situation became uncertain, with violent arrests beginning. Kirill's perception of the protests was mixed. He saw the strength of the protesting crowd and felt that the police were not as strong. At the same time, the vulnerability of individual people holding placards was obvious. They were the targets of police violence because they were individually visible. He saw violent arrests by the riot police's Special Purpose Mobile Unit (OMON). OMON was specially equipped with "hard helmets and tasers" (cf. Cattin 2022). It was frightening in a hard, rigid and cold monumental equipment. Kirill was afraid of violence against him and those close to him – both physical and mental.

Kirill's story paints a picture of the protests against the war among big city inhabitants like him. Though he did not have any particular ties to Ukraine, no relatives or friends there, he experienced this war as evil because, for him, "it happened so close". In Saint Petersburg, where Kirill and his girlfriend lived, protest activities were familiar and exciting for younger and middle-aged generations (cf. Gromov 2014, 46). Public corporeal representations and performative protests were almost the only way people could communicate the political in Russia (Yatsyk 2018; Fenghi 2020). The citizens probably believed that through protest they could be in dialogue with the authorities and influence the state politics. Contrarywise, Alexandre, a 24-year-old male interviewee from Moscow who had previously been politically active, confessed that by the beginning of this war, he had stopped believing in public protest. Although, like Kirill, he was considered unfit for military service, he did not trust the officials and felt extremely insecure, deciding to flee Russia as soon as it was possible for him.

Experiencing Ukrainianness in Moscow: a Very Personal Story

In comparison to the performativity of public war protests introduced by Kirill, Julia's resistance story is highly private and personal. I interviewed Julia in Saint Petersburg in summer 2023. When the war began, she was 47 years old and held close emotional ties to Ukraine, having spent the first happy years of her life there. Julia's father was from Kyiv, her mother from Moscow. She was born there and came to Kyiv when she was just two weeks old. She spent her early childhood mainly in the Ukrainian capital, with summers spent at her grandmother's cottage near Moscow. At the age of 9, she returned to Moscow with her mother after her parents divorced. At 16 she decided to be a Ukrainian, registering this nationality on her first passport. Later, she

studied engineering and worked and lived in Moscow but regularly visited her father in Kyiv until his death. Thus, the beginning of the war triggered rather deep emotions in her. The current anxiety caused by news of the war was mixed with images from her happy childhood in Ukraine. Her early recollections were full of encounters with various people, relatives and strangers that resembled coloured pictures taken of Kyiv and her happy Ukrainian past.

Julia remembered that life in Kyiv was arranged around the Dnieper River. Mornings began with fishing and swimming very early, before people went to work. Many shops opened their doors at six in the morning, with a lot of people already in the streets. In Julia's recollections, Kyiv was also a developing city, with new residential districts. Families had several children: there were a huge amount of children in Kyiv. The considerable size of the child population was recounted by Julia: "We had classes until K[6] in our school, though there were three schools [in our district]. (…) Children studied in three shifts." Children were "independent and busy" in Julia's idealised Kyiv childhood. Parents and children composed a community of equality and security. Adults treated children with respect and understanding. Her teacher, as she remembered, always listened and spoke to pupils with respect, giving children the space to be themselves, something which did not take place in her Moscow school later.

In Julia's recollections, Kyiv was a completely secure city. People were all together, whether part of the intelligentsia – as her family was – or the working class. She remembered the café where she and her friend drank milkshakes. There they saw truck drivers having dinner: "It was only a positive atmosphere". Another of Julia's memories is of a sunny summer day:

> A man in a t-shirt and with a bottle of kefir is sitting on the fence, a little bit plump. He's a worker, a man of working occupation in Kyiv. He does not smell of vodka, of nothing… [being a child] you can ask him about directions rather than be afraid of him.

At some point during our conversation, Julia engaged in a virtual dialogue with the Russian authorities challenging their allegation that Ukraine is a fascist state (e.g., ISD 2022). She told me about her rural eastern Ukrainian relatives, whom she and her father used to visit. Hard-working farmers, they were early to wake up, living a measured life. Their main concern was food production. The most amazing moment of this visit for her was that she, her father and the villagers all looked the same

6 In the Soviet school, classes were enumerated with letters. K is the tenth letter of the Russian alphabet (without considering the letters Jo and short I).

– their noses and eyes were "of different ages and sexes but similar". While there, she met people from older generations who wore tattooed numbers on their hands from the concentration camps of the Second World War. Many of them received compensation from Germany as *Ostarbeiters*. Thus, her silent question was, "How could *they* be the fascists?" "So, this is this Ukraine, the eastern part, the life like that," she said. As if answering the Russian state propaganda, she concluded as follows:

> I just know how life is arranged there. How many aggressive people are there? Zero! In these areas. The east of Ukraine until Kyiv and including Kyiv and Kharkiv. They are busy people. They are occupied with their households and families. They just eat their dinner and repair the fence. That is what they are doing. They go somewhere to earn money, somebody studies. […] And you see, their land… they would not leave it.

Julia stressed that when the war began her first hours were awful: reality and unreality were intertwined in her mind. She felt that she had died, imagining "Putin's soldiers marching in Kyiv". She saw everything but could do nothing, as if somebody had injected her with an anaesthetic. That is why she mostly lay at home and woke up only to eat a little piece of food, to avoid losing consciousness. She remembered having a clear image of a tank "shooting and shooting and shooting" at her: "I was in pain, and I felt that a big part of me had been blown off […] as if there was a huge hole." At the same time, her secure space abruptly diminished. The moment she went outside, she saw policemen "looking into the eyes of every citizen" – there were, unusually, several of them together, especially in the metro. She became afraid that her pain and hidden resistance would be revealed. She felt that the terror took its place within her, and it made her visible.

Julia admitted that she could not stay physically with this terror for too long. Immediately after the invasion, she decided to leave Russia for the first two weeks at least, in order to be "able to breathe, literally to breathe, to stay alive". She left quickly, thanks to her Schengen visa and freelance status. In Europe, she recalled, almost everybody wanted to talk to her about the war. People discussed the geopolitical reasons, the consequences, the diplomatic solutions and other abstract political things that were far removed from Julia's real life. They were not personally involved, as she saw, and they did not feel a similar pain to what Julia felt. It was almost impossible for her to discuss the war with them – people did not understand that it was a painful and very personal story. Thus, she found no relief in Europe and no solution as to how to continue there. In the end, she was a Russian citizen, her visa had expired, and she returned home.

Listening to Julia's recollections, I thought that, like Kirill, Julia did not believe the war between Russia and Ukraine could take place. Her childhood world included

Kyiv and Moscow. Ukraine and Russia seemed solidly built into her recollections. It was a coherent secure space without contradictions. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine broke into this space of hers, and she took it very painfully and very personally. The contradictions which she had not considered actualised after the war began: she found herself at a crossroads between her ethnicity, local identity and citizenship. The war required her to take an immediate decision about her political position, and she decided to become more mobile and prepare herself for future emigration from Russia.

Resisting Disintegration by Mobility

The next two interviews with Inna and Katerina demonstrated that mobility was crucial to their war experiences. Our conversation with Inna, an executive manager in her 60s working on international research projects, happened in autumn 2023, 16 months after the Russian-Ukrainian war began. Although Inna's father was from Kyiv, and she had worked in the eastern part of Ukraine in the past, she did not feel any particular closeness to the country, as she told me. She had no sense of the war either physically or emotionally. For Inna, it happened "only on the map". Instead, she felt a deep empathy for her Ukrainian colleagues. She was in regular contact with them. When they told her about their conditions – the lack of food and heating and the bombing – she experienced the horror of her colleagues in her body: "It makes my skin crawl. It is as if the bombs also hit me."

At the very beginning, as she recounted, she did not believe that the war could happen. When the invasion began, she recalled experiencing enormous stress and confusion – almost a collapse. It was a shock, as if somebody had hit her head. She felt that her body was separated from herself and moved beyond her control, like it became – she tried to find the right analogy – an "astral body". At the same time, it was also a problem for her to find a proper place for her physical body ("Where it was, could be [now], or must be [in the future]."). It was just unclear how to locate herself in the new currently configured space to "put herself together": it seemed to her that after the war began, she "crumbled into pieces".

For Inna, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was "a cataclysm of enormous proportions". She revealed that she withdrew from her usual life, experienced social uncertainty that was too difficult to deal with and began to fall ill regularly. Inna considered the loss of her sexual energy and desire to be the most crucial damage the war had done to her life. She clarified that her sexual desire was a proactive part of herself; it was her life energy, and it diminished drastically – "everything turned to zero". The absence of her sexual energy informed her of her loss of vitality. At the same time, she was not talking about pleasure here: Inna associated pleasure with going to the theatre or exhibitions, which she used to love, and regarded this as unethical during the war.

Inna explained that her condition correlated with what was happening in society around her – the latter was showing large-scale disintegration, especially in Europe. She

started to fear that Russia would close its borders, and that Europe would do the same. And, of course, some of her fears were realised – European countries severely restricted the mobility of Russian citizens and the movement of Russian goods and money on their territory. As a result, the society that Inna had experienced as united became divided by a "gulf". People who did things together landed on different sides of that gulf – in Russia and beyond. Being on either the Russian side or the other side of the world side, people inevitably began to see the war in different ways. "It is like drifting plateaus that are slowly moving [away] from each other," she commented. She resisted this by working much more than before and "jumping from one side [of the gulf] to the other and back" – her dual citizenship, allowed her to travel between Russia and European countries. She found it physically difficult to travel a lot, as she said, but not to travel was even harder for her: "I thought that I had to travel everywhere. I felt that society was disintegrating, and I needed to keep it with my body, moving it from one place to another." This activity was rather irrational in her opinion because, in reality, she could not stop the process of separating Russia from Europe.

Katerina's story was also about geopolitical and corporeal disintegration. Katerina was about 50 years old when I interviewed her at her home in Russia in the autumn of 2023. By this time, she had lived abroad for many years with long occasional stays in Russia. She was currently a housewife: she had not been able to find a permanent position as a political scientist in Europe, where she had been living. In February 2022, she came to Russiafor a one-week visit alone, withiut her family. Almost immediately upon arriving, Russia recognised the Donetsk and Lugansk Republics. Katerina felt bad about the recognition of these states anticipating the worst – as she said, the situation was "so fucked up!". However, within two days, the situation had worsened: Russia had launched its war against Ukraine.

Katerina remembered sitting in her apartment after the war began, looking at specks of dust in a ray of sunlight – like in the film *The Days of the Turbins* – and feeling that her world was ruined and her home was no longer safe. Everything disappeared in a moment. Wanting to be with others, she tried to meet people as much as possible; at home, where she was alone, she could not sleep or eat, just work while "gritting her teeth". She was as in a state of delirium, or perhaps in a film where reality and her physical body were separated from each other. She felt unable to remain in this state for long and left Russia soon after. She recalled that when the bus crossed the Russian border, all the passengers breathed a sigh of relief. The bus appeared to her as Noah's Ark, saving them from aggression.

According to her story, it was probably the first time Katerina recognised the wall between Russia and the rest of the world, the wall that later separated her colleagues and friends in Russia from her. At the same time, she was a Russian citizen in Europe. That is why her and her family's transnational life and mobility demanded

special effort to keep it together. In the family, she was responsible for getting these social and geographical pieces together as a whole, and it was not easy in the new situation. It was a grim period for Katerina: she lost her joy of life. Anxiety was unable to leave her. After the war began, her physical condition was defined by news of the war – any missile attack against Ukraine disabled her completely. Katerina lost her wish to travel to Russia because she did not know what and who she might face there. She did not allow herself to enjoy the beauty of her beloved home city, music or cinema. She did not want to go to concerts, feeling alienated from "people" who could be happy in Russia now. She was constantly waiting for something bad. She was emotionally ruined and felt that her "mind could not digest" these global problems – the political changes were too global. Later, she believed she needed perhaps some medical help to get enough "air to breathe" into her head because her mind had become "one constantly tensed muscle". The only thing she allowed herself to enjoy was nature: the smell and the rustling of leaves that she remembered from her childhood. It reconciled her with her necessary visits to Russia.

Explaining her relations to Ukraine, Katerina stressed that she did not have strong ties to the country. However, she knew many people from Ukraine, and she had many colleagues there. She had visited different places in Ukraine at different periods of her life. She felt that the country was an integrated part of her biography that is rooted in her Soviet past. She included it in her Soviet-embodied everyday life experience. Trying to explain her painful condition, Katerina spoke about the post-Soviet peoples' collective body. From her childhood, she remembered that at primary school she was taught to experience the unity of the fifteen Soviet republics and "the friendship of their peoples" when children wore folk costumes and represented the Soviet republics through song and dance during public festivals. These were her lessons in embodying the Soviet geopolitical identities. In Katerina's opinion, Ukraine was part of a collective body learnt from Soviet times "whether we want to accept this or not". In her opinion, people who lived in the Soviet Union, including Russia, Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, had some kind of a common body. This consisted of common bodily communication and interaction, priceless experiences that cannot be explained in national or ethnic terms. Hence why she took seriously any war happening in the post-Soviet space. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was particularly painful in her opinion, and she tried to explain it: "It is like one hand has gone against another one." In her opinion, this is the reason people took this war so emotionally in Russia. At the same time, she stressed that Ukraine is a sovereign state, politically independent from Russia, and admitted that no one can contest this.

THE GEOPOLITICAL BODY RECOLLECTED. HEALING MOBILITY

Why did Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina experience the war that Russia began against Ukraine with sickness, feelings of corporeal disintegration and a loss of control over their physical abilities and desires? Why could they not continue their daily routine? For what reasons did all of them decide to leave Russia? "War is an event […] that ruptures the network of material objects, social relations, and symbolic meanings that make the world appear as coherent, consistent, and meaningful" (Dunn 2017, 23). Indeed, the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which Russian authorities manipulatively called a "special military operation"[7], affected a huge number of people in Ukraine as well as in Russia. Every day the media brought news that thousands of people had been killed and millions displaced. The war has ruined both material infrastructures and social relations. It has been a violation of people's normal life, their worlds of consistent meanings and their subjectivities. Finding meaningfulness in life and a coherent existence demands a lot of effort, and the process is usually long and painful (cf. Oushakine 2009; Dunn 2017).

My interlocutors, Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina had different relationships with Ukraine. Kirill did not have any close personal relations. Inna had working ties to Ukraine. Julia's experiences were deeply rooted in her Ukrainian past, whereas Katerina mostly associated herself with the Baltic states where she had strong ties but, she stressed, special relations with Ukraine. Nevertheless, they made it clear that they experienced a special embodied unity bonded by memory, family ties, friendship, work collaborations and an embodied geopolitical imagination. The war between Russia and Ukraine disrupted these ties and broke this embodied unity; it injured people's spatial identities and imagined bodies. For my interviewees, the war was not only unethical but also "counterintuitive" – unnatural and meaningless: they could not believe it possible. For them it was a suicidal war against themselves: "one hand fighting against another" or "shooting at ourselves". Integrity was important, but war conveyed to them a traumatic disintegration, as if they were irrevocably losing part of themselves.[8] The war was experienced as a final disintegration of the imagined post-Soviet unity they experienced corporeally.

7 The term "special military operation" presents the war as a local military conflict. Simultaneously, Russian officials present it as a global confrontation between Russia and the collective West. Navaro-Yashin stresses that the production of confusion can be seen as a special tactic (2002, 175).

8 Surveys conducted before the war, in 2021, showed that the idea of Russo-Ukrainian unity was popular both in Russia and Ukraine. In Russia, 52% of respondents regarded Ukrainians as a fraternal people. In Ukraine, the majority of respondents (55%) did not agree that Russians and Ukrainians are one people; however, 41% did. In the Ukrainian east, 60% agreed. In the Ukrainian west 70%, did not agree (Vedomosti 2021, Rating Group 2021). At the same time, the majority of both Russians and Ukrainians did not support the idea of unifying the two states. The situation today has changed significantly and demands further monitoring.

Listening to Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina's stories, I could follow how in their recent lives everything became political or, more precisely, geopolitical in the context of the war. Everyday practices of private life, leisure, travelling, professional activity, friendship, family relations, even clothes came to be seen through the lens of this geopolitical conflict – they became (geo)politicised in a newly established (geo) politicised space (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002). This expanding new geopolitical space contradicted my interviewees' (geo)political corporeality and spatiality, creating an uneasiness between their bodies and the social environment. I could almost literally see how their space of individual agency – cultural, social, political, professional and private – was transforming under the circumstances of the war. It is true that despite the rebellious political enthusiasm of the political opposition prior to 2012 (Gromov 2014), the space for public politics had nonetheless recently been shrinking in Russia because of growing repression (Yatsyk 2018, 128). The process was systematic but gradual. Step by step, people were normalising newly appeared marks of political pressure by pushing these to the back of their consciousness and forgetting (see Navaro-Yashin 2002, 175). However, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the space for representing public political opposition diminished drastically. Almost immediately it became filled with the representatives of state power (police, OMON) exercising physical oppression and pushing political opponents from the public space. Rather quickly, war supporters, state propaganda and indifference filled the spatial void. My interviewees experienced this deprivation painfully and differently, representing different spatialities and corporealities at the intersection of their age, gender, ethnic and local identities, and citizenship. For Kirill, his experience of public action and protest transformed the collective body into leisure walkers, fragmented and vulnerable to physical repressions. In Julia's public everyday life, people's space of resistance barely extends beyond their bodies under the inspective eyes of police in the street.[9] Inna and Katerina expanded their space of resistance beyond Russia, and immediately they started to break in half. Yet, all of them admitted that 24 February 2024 changed their life completely.

Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina decided to established themselves outside Russia. Post-Soviet countries, such as Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan became important locations in their mobility, sense of security and for their embodied activities. The European countries retained their appeal as a destination. However, the European space, which before the war was relatively homelike and homogenous because of their usual international mobility and ties with relatives, friends and colleagues, became fragmented into discrete nation-states after the war, each implementing distinct regulatory frameworks. These regimes reshaped their spaces

9 One described moment was police in the Moscow metro inspecting mobile phones, searching for protest content. It initiated additional fears and panic among those who were against the war.

according to their formal citizenship, regardless of their anti-war positions. Our subjects' familiar worlds disappeared, and the previous geopolitical unity disintegrated to be reconstructed onto a new base.

Almost all my interviewees, including those quoted here, as well as others, decided to leave Russia after the war began. Their reasons provided for this decision were diverse, and they followed different paths of mobility. Kirill attributed his decision to his emotional response to the war, while Julia was unable to stay home in her "anaesthetic state". Katerina felt that she had lost her home's connection with the body and reality. Inna was trying to keep the countries from moving apart with her dual presence. All of them considered the act of leaving Russia after the beginning of the war as important. Being mobile between Russia and other countries obtained life-saving significance for them.

Kirill in his story mentioned that leaving Russia was, to him, emotional, not reasonable. This opinion – that people decided to leave Russia after the war began without any apparent reason – is widely shared. However, I consider the decision to leave the country as having great symbolic significance for the participants (e.g., Baranova 2023, Rapoport 2023). Their exodus from Russia was a strong act of resistance and, at the same time, a healing practice that carried a symbolic restorative effect[10] on their violated identities and imagined broken bodies. Indeed, their migration was emotionally loaded and highly expressive. When Kirill, Julia, Inna and Katerina left Russia, their leaving may have been silent but it was also an extremely strong communicative action that informed society of their resistance to the aggressive geopolitics of the Russian state. At the same time, while on the move, they renegotiated their bodies within new geopolitical circumstances. By moving between countries, they were making new connections and repairing the ruptures in their bodies, society and space. Though some of them seemed to wander in a liminal space in between, moving back and forth, their mobility, the physical international movement, became a healing instrument that cured their broken and violated bodies and domesticated the hostile environment. Thus, mobility is of particular importance for them. In a way, they were like many other Russian inhabitants, thousands who decided to emigrate from Russia at this time (e.g., Exodus-22 2023, Baranova 2023, Zavadskaya 2023). As other people were displaced from their homes, they also had to rearrange their material environment – to look for new homes, new routes and new sources of income. They had to rearrange their social relations. However, the most important was, as Inna told me in our conversation, to return their lost desires and meaning in their lives.

10 It might be compared to symbolic forms similar to "rituals of resistance", constituting group identity but not "politically effective forms of resistance" (Bell 2009, 71).

CONCLUSION: VIOLATED BODIES AND EMBODIED VIOLENCE

On 24 February 2022, Russia started its full-scale aggression against Ukraine. More than just that, the full-scale war also invited Russian citizens to participate in this institutionalised violence on different levels, involving all categories of the population – men, women, even children (cf. Dubna ru 2023). In an instant, Russian society sank into the totality of militarisation, masculinisation and brutalisation. Individuals were ascribed and prescribed to share a collective body of the nation and a destiny as an aggressor state according to their citizenship. In these circumstances, people who could not accept the SVO, like my interlocutors, recognised the immediate restructuring of power relations in Russian society. They felt their vulnerability in the face of this state-approved aggressive violence towards people like them and reacted strongly to the aggression embodying this violence.

The human body is a spatial category. It creates space within social relations by practising and domesticating it (cf. Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 20). It is aware of its own local, national and international spatiality (e.g., Assmuth et al. 2018; 2024). My interviewees spoke about their physical experiences, contextualising them in particular geopolitical relations. They narrated the embodiment of their feelings, moral sentiments, memories, discourses and multiple social relations addressing nation-states and their political intercourse, placing emphasis on the embedded closeness of Russia and Ukraine. They included themselves in the post-Soviet geopolitical relations and constructed a post-Soviet spatial unity physically experienced. Europe was also included in their spatiality as a familiar and culturally close area. To some extent, they reproduced the Soviet geopolitical values that promoted the territorial and population unity of the Soviet Union. Perhaps they supported also the missionary importance of Russian culture – as do many Russian immigrants who live abroad (Hakkarainen 2024). While the Russian authorities exploited the narrative of Russo-Ukrainian unity to justify the war, for the participants in this study, the latter conveyed collapse and disintegration. Despite secure ties with Ukraine on a personal level, on a national level, these were deteriorating, and they felt it in their bodies. Perhaps it could be compared to the cultural trauma of the Soviet Union's disintegration (Tsygankov 2003, 103; Oushakine 2009; Fenghi 2020, 21)?

The Soviet Union left a huge colonial legacy to its former inhabitants (and the world) after its collapse. They inherited a large cultural heritage; geopolitical hierarchies (Rytövuori-Apunen 2020, 5); ethnic, religious and national violent conflicts; the consequences of technological disasters (Petryna 2002); new national states and hybrid subjectivities living on its borders (cf. Bhabha 1994). In the recent world of post-globalisation, national borders and separation trends after COVID (e.g., Assmuth et al. 2024: 14–16), the post-Soviet legacy does not match

well to the definitive boundaries. Hybrid post-imperial subjectivities that inscribed themselves in the wider world beyond their state earlier are left in a liminal state of "in-betweenness". Thus, they are in search of new domestication and reconstruction of their corporeal identities.

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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF RUSSIA AGAINST THE WAR: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE STAGES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AS A RESOURCE OF ACTIVISM

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This paper explores the role of ethnic identity among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia as a resource for anti-war resistance. It focuses on the qualitative processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination at the individual level, addressing a gap in the social and political analysis of activists' behaviour in Russia. By employing the framework of identity as a narrative, it analyses interviews with ethnic decolonial anti-war activists who possess Indigenous heritage and represent various ethnic groups across Russia. The research highlights the developmental stages of ethnic identity that activists have experienced, particularly emphasising the stages that serve as resources for activism. Moreover, it emphasises the fact that for individuals who have established contact with their ethnic identity, activism emerges as an inherent and dynamic response to historical oppression. Additionally, the paper distinguishes the role of ethnic identity among Indigenous peoples from their racial identity, by providing a nuanced understanding of the specific challenges and dynamics faced by Indigenous peoples in their activism.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous Peoples of Russia, ethnic identity, activism, identity, narrative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity, as part of social identity (Tajfel 1981), is revealed in periods of crisis and instability, which empowers it with potential for resistance. Since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion on Ukraine in 2022, the number of anti-war movements based on belonging to ethnic minority groups has increased rapidly. Over twelve months, the activists' anti-war movement has grown from zero to dozens. Educational initiatives using decolonial narratives have emerged from different

regions of Russia. New projects devoted to ethnic minority groups are constantly being created in independent Russian-language media. Indigenous Peoples of Russia who identify themselves as ethnic minorities have started sharing their stories on social media about facing discrimination from the Russian ethnic majority. Hashtags indexing keywords about racism and xenophobia in Russia toward ethnic minority groups display over a thousand of comments and messages from people who identify as Indigenous Peoples of Russia[1] (Zibrova 2023, 54–60). Emerging activist movements can be categorised into anti-war advocacy groups, educational initiatives, anti-racism discourse and political alliances. The question is this: how do the processes of ethnic self-identification and ethnic self-determination at the individual level influence the decision to become an activist?

Activism is political engagement linked with awareness of and involvement in current sociopolitical events (Fish et al. 2021). The aim of the engagement is to seek to change formal political processes and policies through grassroots organising (Dennis 2016, 29–51). Nevertheless, resistance to political conflicts, where a state justifies military actions against another state, can be recognised as more than seeking justice within the state, making the activism of Indigenous Peoples of Russia against the war a unique case of appealing to ethnic identity as a resource for resistance. War is one of the most impactful events in the sociopolitical and economic landscape that affects everyone. It is a crisis that changes lives and brings instability. In social and political activism, war is an unavoidable issue. It can serve as a powerful catalyst for developing activism skills and reinforcing values, particularly when activists question and challenge the objectives and justifications of the war.

The interest of active representatives of Indigenous Peoples in their ethnic identity unites them and transforms this identity into political and social power, rendering them visible to the ethnic majority group. According to Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples by the International Labour Organisation (1989) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007), the right to self-identification is recognised as a fundamental right of Indigenous Peoples. However, despite international legislation, the laws of the Russian Federation limit the definition of indigeneity as "Numerically Small Indigenous Peoples of North Siberia, and the Far East" (KMNS; *Korenniye malochislenniye narody Severa, Siberia i Da l' nega Vostoka*),

1 The terms "Indigenous" and "Indigenous Peoples" are capitalised to recognise and respect the distinct cultural, social and political identities of these groups, following the APA guidelines for racial and ethnic terms, which promote the use of bias-free language and the acknowledgment of diverse identities and experiences. See "Spelling and Capitalisation of Racial and Ethnic Terms" (APA Style) and "Summary Guidelines for Race and Ethnicity" (American Psychological Association), for example: "Indigenous People of Canada" https://www.apa.org/about/policy/summary-guidelines-race-ethnicity (accessed 30.05.2024).

defined by including ethnic groups with less than 50,000 people who live in the areas of traditional settlements of their ancestors and maintain a traditional way of living. As a result of this contradiction with international legislation, the concept of indigeneity is a contested issue in Russia (Ksenofontov and Petrov 2024).

The Russian territory consists of over 80 provinces, with an approximate demographic composition of 80% ethnic Russians and 20% non-dominant ethnic groups. Ethnicity in Russia is often linked to a territory: 21 provinces are "ethnic republics", whose specific status designates them as "ethnic homelands", a result of ethnic federalism. Additionally, the criteria for being recognised as Indigenous within Russia place the largest groups of ethnic minorities, who live in "titular nations" inside the ethnic republics, in a position of having unequal rights compared to the KMNS. Despite the fact that the term "titular nations" is neither officially recognised nor legally codified in the laws of the Russian Federation, it usually refers to a large ethnic group that gives its name to an ethnic republic. This feature of Russian ethnic diversity overlaps with economic and spatial inequality, while the latter often has specific cultural traits due to the history of settlement (Yusupova 2024). The issue of ethnic equality is shaped historically and has a huge impact on how the Indigenous Peoples have reacted to the war.

However, the individual psychological processes of developing ethnic identity among Indigenous Peoples have not been socially and politically analysed as part of activists' behaviour in Russia. This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on the qualitative processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination at the individual level to explore the role of ethnic identity among Indigenous Peoples in Russia as a resource for anti-war resistance. This research is based on interviews with ethnic anti-war activists who possess Indigenous heritage and represent various ethnic groups across Russia. These case studies are examined using the framework of identity as a narrative.

The first part of the paper is dedicated to reviewing and synthesising the existing literature on ethnic identities and activism, including anti-war movements, through the lenses of decolonising approaches to ethnic, racial and Indigenous studies. Second, I explain the background of the study and describe the research process, demonstrating how decolonial approaches expand the understanding of the processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination. Third, I present the narratives themselves. Finally, I analyse these narratives and show the developmental stages of ethnic identity that activists have experienced, particularly highlighting the stages that serve as resources for activism.

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ACTIVISM

The role of ethnic identity among ethnic minorities and Indigenous Peoples in activism has been studied from different perspectives: racial positioning and political

engagement, collective well-being and resistance, allyship and collective identity. Studies show that ethnic identity has a strong connection with ally behaviour and predicts involvement in political action (Fish et al. 2021). Activists belonging to communities of colour have different ways of engaging in activism based on reflections of their experiences of oppression and personal experiences of discrimination, whereas White activists critically investigate their own power and privileges. Moreover, the first steps in activism, where ethnic identity plays a crucial role, such as in anti-racial organising, are critical for the development of social justice identity among ethnic minorities (Kornbluh et al. 2020, 151–163). Ethnic identity is also examined in the context of non-violent resistance. This perspective shows a link between belonging to an ethnic minority and negative stereotypes that associate many minority groups with violence and hostility, leading to support for more punitive policies that are far more likely to target minorities. Emphasising awareness of such perceptions is suggested as a new focus of activist work (Manekin and Mitts 2022, 161–180). Ethnic-racial identity can be a source of strength and resilience when experiencing injustice. Additionally, it may serve as a springboard for recognising and disrupting marginalisation. Developing ethnic-racial identity impacts other social identities that shape relationships with different communities (Rivas-Drake et al. 2022, 317–326).

Nonetheless, belonging to an ethnic minority is not enough for political and social engagement (Lin 2020). Studying ethnic identity from the perspective of group consciousness in activism shows that personal experiences need to be transformed into political motivation. Depoliticised ethnic minorities, however, tend to deny racism and explain their experiences of discrimination as functions of individual bigotry rather than systemic racism or inequality. Reflection on experiences of ethnic identity challenges dominant racial tropes and bridges gaps between racial positioning, experiences, identities and ideologies. These processes are crucial for activists (Lin 2020).

It is important to distinguish the role of the ethnic identity of Indigenous Peoples from racial identity. Although Indigenous Peoples experience similar challenges of discrimination, language loss and marginalisation as other ethnic minorities, their situation is distinct in terms of their rights and identities. Unlike other ethnic minorities who focus on individual rights, Indigenous Peoples emphasise the importance of collective rights. Despite being recognised as ethnic minorities, Indigenous people often find themselves excluded from Indigenous status, which leads to not being accepted as disadvantaged groups (Sarivaara et al. 2013, 369–378). Moreover, a recent comparative analysis of convergences and divergences in the contemporary activist imperatives and aspirations of groups such as Black People and Indigenous Peoples shows that, for instance, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has the potential for anti-racism activism, but it does not address the anti-colonial imperatives

of Indigenous Peoples in activism (Townsend-Cross and Gatwiri 2024, 1–22). Exclusion from Indigenous status, as a result of a history of colonisation and a settler-colonial strategy that manifests itself in assimilating large groups of Indigenous Peoples into mainstream society, can be recognised as one of the specific features that have shaped the activism of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia.

Nevertheless, race and ethnicity are rarely articulated in the activism of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia within the state. Land rights are expressed in terms of territory and economic inequality, which are highlighted in local ecological protests driven by various factors other than ethnicity. These protests also occur infrequently and involve all inhabitants of the areas where the protests takes place, regardless of their ethnicity. Rights related to language and culture are expressed in terms of social inequality, while race and ethnic discrimination are not recognised as structural and institutional problems. These features of the activism of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia are shaped by the securitisation of race and ethnic issues due to the authoritarian context in the Russian Federation (Yusupova 2019, 1459–1478), whereas the absence of discussion in Russian academia about the activists' behaviour among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia is a consequence of the refusal to see race as an object for social and political analysis (Yusupova 2021, 224–233). All these might lead to different strategies of appealing to ethnic identity in activism, specifically in anti-war resistance within conflict states like Russia.

Overall, there is a contradiction in the methods applied to the study of ethnic identity in social and political activism. On the one hand, quantitative findings do not indicate ethnic self-identification and self-determination at the individual level. On the other hand, qualitative studies that do not analyse ethnic identity development fail to explain which stages of ethnic identity impact engagement in activism. Even though existing research emphasises the role of ethnic identity in activism for ethnic minorities, it is not clear how the experience of being Indigenous impacts political and social engagement, especially for the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. Notably, these activists began their work during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which the Russian government labelled as "denazification", shaped under the ideological narrative of the "Russian World" (*Russkii mir*). This narrative appears in various state doctrines, including the Russian constitution, prioritizing ethnic Russians above others within the state.

METHOD: IDENTITY AS A NARRATIVE

Identity, one of the most complex concepts in social science, is studied through many theoretical approaches. This term is richly, and as Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 1–47) put it, "indeed for an analytical concept, hopelessly – ambiguous". The conceptual

and explanatory work depends on the context of its use and the theoretical tradition from which it derives (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1–47).

My research question, "how the ethnic identity of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia is related to their anti-war activism", is situated within a theoretical framework that interprets identity as a basis for social or political action (Cohen 1985, 663–716) and as a collective phenomenon involving perceived significant sameness among group members (Connor 1994; Collins 2022). In studies of Indigenous identity, self-identification, as an expression of the right to self-determination, holds significant importance (Sarivaara et al. 2013, 369–378). This is due to the history of oppression of Indigenous Peoples and the erasure of identity through assimilation strategies. Therefore, it is important for us, in answering the research question, to show how Indigenous people themselves articulate their identity and their relationships with it at different stages of their lives. Here, I use the theory of the three-stage model of ethnic identity (Phinney 1989; 1990, as cited in Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014, 9–38). This theory assesses three components of ethnic identity: exploration, resolution and affirmation as well as their relationship to context and the role they play in ethnic identity development. However, unlike existing research that has examined quantitative processes of the relationship between sociopolitical activism and ethnic identity in large sample-sizes (Fish et al. 2021), I focus on qualitative processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination at an individual level. To determine these processes, I apply the concept of identity as a narrative (Hammack 2008, 222–247), which focuses on the mechanism of constructing meaning and integrating personal experience and context. As personal narrations allow for the examination of the processes of social change, in this paper, I analyse stories of Indigenous activists to distinguish the ethnic components of their life strategies and the relationship between individual aspects and the processes of social change.

Background of the Study

Using decolonising research approaches, as advocated for by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (in Lee and Evans 2021), I proudly assert my dual identity as an Indigenous researcher and an individual who articulates her Indigenous experience in Russia with precision. I intentionally bridged the gap between myself as a researcher and the interviewees, sharing in their emotions as they recounted their experiences as Indigenous individuals. I shed tears alongside participants of my research as they shared their Indigenous experiences, and I took pride in their recognition of the value of their Indigenous identities, as well as my own. Introducing myself as Indigenous allows me to build trust with research participants. It was important for them to avoid expending unnecessary effort explaining the social, political and economic context

of being Indigenous in Russia and to focus on their personal experiences. Furthermore, one of the crucial aspects of my decolonising methodology as an Indigenous researcher was inviting participants to independently articulate the stages of their ethnic identity development. The application of universalisation, a Western-centric colonial approach that manifests itself by excluding or exotifying the experiences of "the Other" – those who do not belong to the West – is still utilised by researchers and significantly restricts our understanding of ethnic self-identification and ethnic self-determination processes (Lee and Evans 2021). Moreover, there remains a dearth of knowledge regarding when and how ethnic identity evolves into a resource for social and political activism.

Participants and Procedure

Some of the participants of the research had gone into exile, while others were residing in Russia at the time of the study. Considering the inherent risks associated with the involvement of ethnic anti-war activists in actions that make them more visible, I invited Anna Zueva, an independent journalist known as an ally to the Indigenous Peoples of Russia, to collaborate with me on this research project by conducting online interviews with participants together with me. Each interview lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. Zueva's role was to serve as a secure intermediary between myself, the main contributor to the research, and some of the participants. She compiled a list of potential participants who identify themselves both as Indigenous Peoples of Russia and also as activists and extended invitations for interviews through secure messaging platforms. This intermediate contact fostered a sense of safety among the participants, reassuring them that their contact information was not stored on my devices. Additionally, Anna was present during the interviews and contributed to the transcription of some stories. The transformation of these transcripts into narratives, the analysis of the data and the interpretation thereof, as well as the composition of this paper, were conducted by me, the author.

Nine activists agreed to participate in this study. Given that it focuses on the ethnic identity of Indigenous Peoples of Russia involved in sociopolitical and anti-war activism, it was crucial to invite participants who had experience living in Russia. The primary source of the data collected was from semi-structured online interviews. These interviews covered three main topics: (1) ethnic identity, which included questions about how participants identify themselves, when they started to recognise their ethnic identity, whether it was linked to specific events in their lives and how they would describe their relationship with their ethnic identity; (2) activism, which explored how and when their activism began and how they perceived the connection between their ethnic identity and their activism; and (3) the war, which investigated how the war has influenced their activism and ethnic identity.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed upon completion. The transcripts were organised chronologically to distinguish the evolving processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination. To do so, I used the multimethod restorying framework (Nasheeda et al. 2019), which facilitates the transformation of transcripts into meaningful narratives. This framework consists of narrative inquiry, restorying and integration, all of which are conducted collaboratively with participants. The objective was to explore how various stages of life impact engagement in activism. To differentiate between these stages and to pinpoint which stage illuminates specific events and experiences, all the narratives were segmented according to the following timeline: "childhood and family", "youth and young adulthood" and "activism and the war". Some of the participants added the segment "now" if they assumed that their ethnic identity at the current life stage was different from the "war" segment. The segment "war" was divided into "activism" and "the war" for participants with activist backgrounds preceding the war (herein, and in subsequent sections of the text, "the war" is used as a shorthand for "the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine").

According to the multimethod restorying framework, "co-creating" and "meaning" phases are crucial for rendering stories fully complete. This approach allows for the filtering of any private information and for participants to claim ownership of their stories. The narratives were read and re-read by both the author and the participants to ensure that the sequence of events accurately reflected the participants' voices. Furthermore, this step contributes to a decolonial approach by involving Indigenous voices in representing their experiences and producing new knowledge, rather than appropriating their stories as mere scientific materials. During the "co-creating" and "meaning" phases, narratives were organised in chronological order and segmented into life stages. Each stage was named to mirror a particular phase of ethnic identity development based on the content of that stage. Every segment was titled to express the corresponding stage of their ethnic identity. These narratives were then forwarded to participants for adjustments.

In the "Results and Findings" section below, excerpts from the narratives developed using the multimethod restoring framework are presented. The stories have been shortened due to space limitations. For ethical and confidentiality purposes, names have been concealed and only ethnic identifications are mentioned.

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration for future research. Notably, an intersectional approach was not employed, and participants were not categorised by gender. It would be valuable for future studies to incorporate an intersectional lens to examine the interconnections between gender, sex, ethnicity and socio-political activism among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia within the Russian context.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Childhood and Family

The first segments of the stories are dedicated to the childhoods of the participants. The family was their first environment, where they experienced the initial stages of socialisation and encounters with the larger world, such as experiences in kindergarten, at school and interactions with peers. These early experiences set the stage for the development of their ethnic identity and their interactions with broader society.

The titles given to these story segments by the participants effectively capture their experiences and feelings as regards their early years. The segments are named as follows: "Denial and Embarrassment"; "Independence, Pride and Hatred"; "Awkwardness"; "Shame. Russian, but not Russian. Sakha, but not Sakha"; "My Ethnic Identity was Whole, but Not Valued"; "Being Buryat Means Being an Outcast"; "Realisation of the World's Scale and Interest"; "From a Natural Stage to the Breakdown of One's Ethnic Identity"; "The Natural Process of Absorbing Culture". Each title summarises the complex interplay between personal and cultural identity as experienced by the participants.

Although the first (social) identity crisis generally occurs in adolescence (Buckingham 2008), one's ethnic identity, as one type of social identity, develops in childhood. This period is characterised by greater sensitivity than in adolescence, as it is when a child discovers the significance of his or her appearance to others – skin colour, eye shape and so on – that a sense of inadequacy may arise, influencing the formation of personality (Erikson 1994).

> "Denial and Embarrassment"
> I lived in the capital (Cheboksary), where almost no one speaks Chuvash. No one spoke Chuvash at school. In my family, only my grandfather and grandmother speak it. They deliberately did not teach their children [my parents] Chuvash because they did not think it was necessary. They believed that it was, on the contrary, only a hindrance, hindering career advancement. (S, Chuvash)

> "Independence, Pride and Hatred"
> My family is purely Tatar. My mother is a teacher of Tatar language and literature. My parents themselves were sometimes embarrassed to speak Tatar [in public places]… The world was divided, so to speak, only into black and white: there were no stories about how good we Tatars are. Our history was studied superficially. (N, Tatar)

> "Awkwardness"
> Everyone in the family spoke Tatar, but I was not specifically taught the language. They always spoke Russian with me. The feeling of awkwardness is the main thing I remember from my childhood, and also perplexity. In the family, the Russian language

> was dominant. But when I went to traditional Tatar family feasts the Tatar language was dominant, and everyone addressed me in Tatar. I understood, but couldn't reply. This feeling of awkwardness, that you are a bit of an incomplete Tatar, still haunts me. (L, Bashkirt's Tatar)

> "Shame. Russian, but not Russian. Sakha, but not Sakha"
> As a child, I didn't think much about [my] ethnic identity. The only thing was that I felt uncomfortable because I didn't speak the Yakut [Sakha] language… Later, when I was studying on an exchange in Singapore and China, I was constantly asked why I was from Russia but didn't look Russian. I had to constantly explain that there are many different peoples in Russia and people look different. I even shamed people for not knowing about the peoples of Russia. At the same time, I think I have a trauma (of identity) because the Sakha themselves didn't really accept me as a representative of their people. Relatives also joked about me, saying that I speak English well, but I had better learn my native language. I was ashamed, and this did not increase my desire to learn the language. (Y, Sakha)

> "My Ethnic Identity was Whole, but Not Valued"
> A good command of the Russian language gave me privileges, made me feel superior, as if I was developing some kind of snobbery… It seemed to me that my Tuvan identity was not particularly important and could not be useful in any practical sense. At that time, I did not understand the value of all this history [about being Tuvan]. (D, Tuvan)

> "Being Buryat Means Being an Outcast"
> This identity comes not only from me but also from society, how it identifies me. I found out that I am Buryat when I was seven years old. I started walking to school on my own. And boys on the street began to insult me and throw stones at me, shouting various offensive words… I understood that the world sees me differently than other people. I grew up in Irkutsk, a city with a colonial history. It is precisely with the atmosphere of the city that I associate the fact that for most of my life, I have perceived my identity as a burden. (U, Buryat)

The family plays a significant role in the formation of a person's ethnic identity. Provided that information about the traditions and culture of the ethnic group is passed on, even when confronted with the racist practices of the environment, children discover resilience and the ability to feel pride in their ethnic identity. Resilience can be demonstrated through these feelings of pride and can already occur in childhood but only when there is some degree of immersion in the culture, traditions and language of one's people.

> "Realisation of the World's Scale and Interest"
> I spoke Buryat and had some knowledge of the Tatar language. For the first time (at 9–10 years of age), I realised my ethnic affiliation when I moved with my family to

> Ulan-Ude. In the class, there were Russians, Buryats, Armenians, Jews. It was the first time I found myself in a diverse environment... Once, the guys forgot me at the market. They told the chess club leader about it. The teacher ran to the market and when she arrived, she saw me on a cushion surrounded by Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, drinking tea. I was content and happy. (P, Buryat)
>
> "From a Natural Stage to the Breakdown of One's Ethnic Identity"
> Everyone in my family spoke the Yakut [Sakha] language, and I did not notice my ethnic identity, despite understanding that I am Sakha and my relatives are also Sakha. (R, Sakha)
>
> "Natural Process of Absorbing Culture"
> I went to a national Buryat school with an in-depth study of the Buryat language. I absorbed all of this: games, holidays, important dates, rituals. Language is, of course, also an integral part of my identity… It's such a natural process when you grow up in an environment and absorb all this – thanks to school, as well. I grew up in a very Buryat sphere, so I didn't have problems with [ethnic] identity. (V, Buryat)

In the segment "childhood and family", important factors influencing the development of a person's ethnic identity include whether participants speak or do not speak their language, closeness or distance to the traditions of the ethnic group (holidays, religious and secular) and experience of discrimination based on ethnicity. In conditions of isolation and protection from the (ethnic) majority, when the ethnic majority suppresses the language, distorts historical facts or shows them only from their own perspective, ethnocentrism is formed as a defence mechanism. This puts an individual in a state of constant tension, struggling for the right to express his or her ethnic identity.

However, regardless of these elements, it cannot be asserted that their presence or absence is required for involvement in activism later in adulthood.

Youth and Adulthood

In Russia, the transition from youth to adulthood often involves leaving the family home and moving to bigger cities. This could be a district capital, the capital of an ethnic republic or Moscow or Saint Petersburg, the biggest cities in Russia. This change can deepen the development of a person's ethnic identity and push it to a new level. Several participants in this study considered how this time in their lives might have led to activism.

The story segments are named as follows: "Pride and Confidence"; "Acceptance"; "Nostalgia: Buryatia is Where I Am"; "Embarrassment and Otherness"; "Activism: Sharp Injustice and Civic Identity"; "Rejection: I Became Very Russian"; "Assimilation

Instead of Integration and Nostalgia as a Turning Point" and "Living in Constant Fear". Changing the environment contributes to the development of a person's ethnic identity in two ways. First, entering a more diverse environment where diversity is valued and encouraged causes individuals to manifest their ethnic identity. This fosters a close connection between one's ethnic identity and one's personality.

> "Pride and Confidence"
> In school, I went on an exchange programme to the USA, and there I talked a lot about my culture, about the Tatars and about the Bashkirts. There, my Tatar identity fully unfolded. A feeling of pride emerged. It was an amazing feeling. In Russia, I had never experienced anything like that… I realised that you can build much stronger connections with someone by bypassing this "Russian World", that you don't need it. Suddenly, nothing became important, but my ethnic identity became important. (L, Bashkirt's Tatar)

> "Acceptance"
> Being abroad, I was constantly explaining my origins to people abroad, [this] made me always talk about my people, and about the peoples of Russia in general. Despite some snobbery towards those who know little about this, I was forced to seek information myself, and this helped me start accepting myself, my ethnic identity. I began to think more about my uniqueness more often. (Y, Sakha)

Encouragement by the family to connect with one's ethnic identity in childhood endows resilience and the desire to preserve culture even when in an ethnic minority.

> "Nostalgia: Buryatia is Where I Am"
> When I moved to Saint Petersburg, I started missing Buryatia and organised a Buryat community with various events: a ball, screenings of Buryat films for fellow countrymen, cooking national dishes. I have always been proud that we are Buryats. I wanted all our people to be proud as well: I want us to know that we have talented people. For me, this is also a natural process of cohesion: far from home, you miss your homeland, and this can be compensated for by events, concerts, meetings with fellow countrymen. When I moved to another country, I also started organising meetings with fellow countrymen here. I never felt like a stranger anywhere, and at all the community gatherings, I felt safe. (V, Buryat)

Second, an environment that encourages uniformity, where it is important to resemble (primarily in appearance) the ethnic majority, questions the possibility of belonging to that majority. This does not suppress ethnic identity; on the contrary, it fosters

contact with it, constant awareness of its presence and the threat it carries as well as the search for ways to conceal it.

> "Embarrassment and Otherness"
> When I lived in Moscow, I realised that for the people who live there… I am not one of them… They do not perceive me as one of their own. Yes, we are friends, but I do not look like them [physically], and then for the first time, I realised that this [ethnic difference] exists… I thought, since we are similar, you are free to choose your own identity, but in Moscow, it turned out that this is not the case, that I really do not look the same… I started getting involved in activism and began communicating with different national patriots, activists. Their stories showed me that people can somehow stand out [using their ethnic affiliation]. At the same time, it was as if I was embarrassed by my nationality, embarrassed to push forward my ethnicity everywhere, including in activism. (S, Chuvash)

> "Activism: Sharp Injustice and Civic Identity"
> Most of the current Buryat activists appeared in 2012–2013. Then attempts by the Russian nationalist community in Buryatia began to cancel the mandatory study of the Buryat language, which contradicts the constitution… Later, I was shocked by the murder of one of the prominent Buryat public figures, journalist Yevgeny Khamaganov. I was very angry. During this period, I devoted a lot of time to educational and enlightening activities [Buryat language and culture]. Later, I helped during the livestock epidemic [in 2021]. When Buryat farmers were left alone with their problem, the government did not help. Such betrayal greatly disappointed me. Many lost their livelihoods and went to serve in the army to earn money and to survive. (P, Buryat)

> "Rejection: I Became Very Russian"
> Then came the stage of rejection. I finished school and entered university in the Faculty of Philology, majoring in the teaching of Russian language and literature. I still can't understand why I needed this… At that time, I became very Russian, so to speak. I speak and write in Russian better than many Russians, but still, sometimes I hear something like "go back to your Yakutia"… Sometimes people said to me, "Why don't you speak Sakha?" and I answered: "It doesn't matter what language you speak." I was ashamed to be Sakha. Yes, it was a feeling of shame, definitely. It was important for me to be like everyone else, not to stand out. Even, probably, going to study to be a Russian language teacher was a way for me to prove to myself that I am Russian. (R, Sakha)

> "Assimilation Instead of Integration and Nostalgia as a Turning Point"
> Then I moved to Moscow. In the faculty where I studied [at the university], out of more than a hundred students, I was the only Asian. Moscow has a strong influence on how you start to perceive and feel about yourself. There was a lot of microaggression, racist

> remarks and chauvinism towards me… I started to pay more attention to discriminatory things not only towards me but also towards others, as if this value was being encroached upon at the most basic level. Any question about my origin caused tension and a readiness to defend. (D, Tuvan)

> "Living in Constant Fear"
> Moving to Moscow was the next stage in the development of my ethnic identity. After that comfortable experience in the USA, I came to Moscow and plunged into a racial and ethnic hell. I was constantly stopped by the police…While I was studying, I observed racial segregation in student dormitories. We, the non-Russians, were housed with non-Russians from the same regions. Often these were dormitories with the worst conditions. To fit into the situation, I paid great attention to mastering the Russian language. Flawless command of Russian relieved some of the pressure and was my protective strategy… Now I have been diagnosed with depression, but I believe the first episode occurred after a year of living in Moscow. (U, Buryat)

Cases show that contact with one's ethnic identity, which reveals the potential for activism, occurs at the moment experience, often traumatic, is obtained. Traumatic experiences give rise to a sense of otherness. Encountering the ethnic majority, without feeling a sense of belonging and, in some cases, experiencing hostility from the majority, creates a feeling of being an outsider. This is an entirely appropriate response to violence, expressed as a desire to change the current order, reflecting the fundamental intention of activism.

Activism and War

The political engagement of activists of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia is reinforced by the experience of being the Other and the outsider, a theme that is reflected in the story segments titles as follows: "The Necessity of Speaking About (One's) Ethnic Identity"; "Death of Civic Identity and Hatred"; "Outrage and Solidarity"; "Unity"; "Anger, Struggle and Solidarity"; "Belonging"; "First Attempts to Manifest One's Ethnic Identity"; "Activism: Sharp Injustice and Civic Identity"; "From Hurt to Pride"; "Anger, Resentment and Necessity"; "Awakening and Value: Everything Fell into Place"; "Protest and Outrage: Not Standing Aside"; "Resistance: The Desire to Awaken My People from Deception" and "Loss, Burning and Anger".

> "The Necessity of Speaking About (One's) Ethnic Identity"
> When the war began, it seemed to me that it was necessary to speak now, as it has become super important, because the authorities are appealing to the fact that Russian culture is being suppressed in Donbas, in Ukraine, and I live in a republic where

the Chuvash Republic exists only on paper… It seemed to me that now, in culture, this [emphasis on ethnic identity] is a necessity because it shows global injustice. I think many people assess this situation similarly. They see that their relatives are being taken to fight through mobilisation for some values that have nothing to do with these people. Speaking about Chuvash culture and the Chuvash nation during the war seemed to me simply necessary. (S, Chuvash)

"Death of Civic Identity and Hatred"
There was a general mood in society from conversations: everyone was outraged that Tuva, Buryatia, and Dagestan natives as well as those from southern regions of the Russian Federation – Kalmyks and Kazakhs – were dying for the ideas of the "Russian World". Then many realised that if you were born non-Russian in Russia, then, indeed, let's just say, you were simply unlucky. Your life is worth significantly less than the life of a Russian. Your rights will be regularly discriminated against, and the majority of the country's population is fine with that. When I realised that (military) mobilisation was inevitable, I began to prepare, to research how I could help my fellow countrymen. I barely remember the period from September to the end of November. (P, Buryat)

"Outrage and Solidarity"
When the war started, I was just in shock and felt very ashamed. I probably cried for a month. And then I decided that I needed to do something. The example of other ethnic anti-war activists [the Free Buryatia Foundation] inspired me greatly. After some time, a friend from Australia wrote to me, saying, let's record a statement, like the Buryats do. Of course, I agreed. From that moment [the beginning of the war in 2022], I only read the news in Yakut, I listen a lot, I mentally live there, in Yakutia [the Sakha Republic]… They send everyone who is unprotected, including the Sakha, the Yukagirs and the Evenks, and there are even fewer of those. But this is not our war. We need to educate people, enlighten them, tell the history of the republic, the history of the peoples. (R, Sakha)

"Unity"
People started leaving Russia in huge numbers. After the start of mobilisation, I was not at home for a month: we were busy accommodating people. Chuvash, Mari, Bashkirs, Altai, Caucasians – we helped everyone. We never refused anyone help. At one point, I had 15 people sleeping on the floor at my home. The war, I think, played a unifying role. That is, among the Tatars, the national spirit began to awaken: we do not want to be victims of this war. (N, Tatar)

"Anger, Struggle and Solidarity"
I was angry that all of us, the Indigenous people, are hostages. That's why I understand Ukrainians so well: we have similar language traumas, experiences of our cultures being destroyed by Russia… Now I am engaged in educational activism, trying to talk more with Tatars, not for them, but with them. This is important. One of my anti-war

speeches became very famous, and it brought me both a lot of negative feedback, due to my pronunciation [from Tatars, unfortunately], and a lot of support… I see my mission in continuing to tell through… and through my research, through social networks about the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. (L, Bashkirt's Tatar)

"Belonging"
When the war started, I had a lot of anger and rage. The fact that I joined the team of Sakha activists greatly influenced the development of my ethnic identity. I realised that it was among them that I felt at home: we had similar childhoods; we are all from Yakutsk. I was very pleased that they included me in the team [of activists] and said that it didn't matter to them whether I spoke our language or not. Although I had some resistance because I doubted whether I was worthy to represent the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. (Y, Sakha)

"Awakening and Value: Everything Fell into Place"
With the beginning of this full-scale invasion, I realised how important it is to preserve this [Tuvan] identity when it can actually disappear so easily. There might be no Tuvan identity at all. I understood how fragile this thing is, how valuable it is, how unique it is… I am studying the history of Tuva and have started learning the Tuvan language again. It seems to me that I have realised the huge amount of pain I have lived with all my life. Activism, perhaps, has always been my attempt to protect myself. (D, Tuvan)

"Resistance: The Desire to Awaken My People from Deception"
Before the war, I didn't delve deeply into our history. I only knew it superficially, just the basics. And now, I am going through the next stage… I want to tell the Buryats that we were lied to. It's unfair! Because of this, I feel anger, but also strength, inspiration and hope. They nourish me now. I want to awaken the lost [ethnic] identity in other Indigenous Peoples [of Russia]. If you start studying your history, past, culture and language, you truly awaken and can shine a light for others. This is what we do with decolonial activists – we awaken other peoples, our fellow countrymen, from several centuries of slumber. (V, Buryat)

"Loss, Burning, and Anger"
My father died in the summer of 2021 from COVID because he did not receive proper medical care solely because of his race… Oxygen masks in Russia are made for European faces, and they do not fit Asians… The loss of my father radicalised me. I realised that the country does not need non-Russian peoples, especially Asian ones. We are openly neglected. Six months later, the war began. I perceive it as a colonial war… My heart breaks at the sight of photographs of young men who died in the war, my Buryats, fellow countrymen. I understand that this is related to discriminatory practices. The spark that ignited with my father's death was turned into a flame by the war. And now I am in a state of burning. I am burning, and I am angry. (U, Buryat)

Feelings of anger, rage, pain, shock and fear of being vanquished as an entire ethnic group, along with a strong intention to resist the war discourse, a willingness to unite and readiness for solidarity among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia, push ethnic identity to the next level of development. Ethnic identity shifts from a position of being concealed as a threat or a position for manifesting pride to becoming a source of anti-war resistance. Furthermore, speaking from the position of being Indigenous acquires a power that was previously unfamiliar to activists. The power of being in contact with one's ethnic identity provides confidence fundamental to the intention to protect rights and impact the existing social order, even if contact with one's ethnic identity was established later.

The war has made the Indigenous Peoples of Russia visible to the global world due to the constant efforts of activists since the war began, revealing discriminatory colonial practices towards Indigenous people and ethnic minorities. However, visibility still troubles activists and raises issues of safety navigating through the new context of being immigrants or political refugees and also contending with predominantly ethnically White Russian liberals who might view Indigenous activists as a threat that could lead to separatism and the potential collapse of Russia as a state. This context amplifies inner reflections on what it means to be Indigenous in a post-colonial world that still experiences the circumstances of the colonial era, such as wars and militarisation. The process of resilience, which has always existed among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia but was temporarily hidden during the Soviet period, then revitalised (Balzer 2022) at the beginning of modern Russia and then hidden again, is now developing into a new stage where ethnic identity is a crucial element.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study delves into ethnic identity as a resource for activism through narrative analysis. By adopting the concept of identity as a narrative (Hammack 2008, 222–247), it focuses on the mechanism of constructing meaning and integrating personal experience with context. Personal narratives enable the examination of the role of identity in the process of social change. The stories of Indigenous activists identify the ethnic components of their life strategies and explore the relationship between individual aspects and the process of social change.

Exploring further, the uniformity in the development of ethnic identity and its engagement is brought into question. Despite employing the three-stage model of ethnic identity (Phinney 1989; 1990, as cited in Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004, 9–38) within this study, personal narratives disclose that the stages specific to ethnic identity – exploration, resolution and affirmation – do not unfold in a linear or sequential manner. The stories of the research participants show that contact with their ethnic

identity was not constant: they might explore it in childhood due to traumatic experiences or family efforts to preserve tradition and culture, then re-explore it in adulthood due to obtaining knowledge of the hidden history of colonisation. Resolution and affirmation might occur several times due to oppressive circumstances where it is important to choose which identity to disclose so as to protect oneself. This realisation emphasises how ethnic identity, contextualised, manifests in varied forms, leading to the understanding that each individual's path is uniquely fashioned.

Adding to this complexity, the influence of Russian ethnocentrism on non-Russian populations reveals a tendency to perceive ethnic identity as primarily utilitarian. This perspective, emerging from a colonial Russian worldview that asserts an ethnic hierarchy, becomes internalised by ethnically non-Russian individuals, especially Indigenous people. Such internalisation fragments identity, necessitating an ongoing negotiation of self in pursuit of safety. Herein lies the paradox of ethnic identity: it is not merely a choice. What Hammack (2008, 222–247) calls "desire" can be applied as motivation in the context of activism, but it is also an acceptance of inherent identity, challenging individuals to embrace their ethnic identity amidst external pressures. Once this acceptance is made, motivation can be redirected inward to foster a connection with one's ethnic identity, thereby conserving resources rather than expending them. This principle is applicable not only to race and ethnicity but also to any identity that is not a result of personal choice, such as gender, age, physical and mental characteristics, origin and, in some cases, religious or migrant status.

The field data shows diversification in how the ethnic identity of being Indigenous is articulated in the participants' narratives, as expressed in their frustration. This complexity in "identity" is compounded by the persistent disagreement between essentialism and constructionism. This contradiction can be further understood through the lens of identity construction, which suggests that, while identity is shaped by meaningful social practice, motivation is not simply a matter of choice. This distinction helps bridge the essentialist-constructionist divide, highlighting the dynamic interplay between inherent traits and social influences.

Transitioning to the realm of activism, it is posited as a dynamic response to systemic historical oppression, highlighting the dichotomy of behaviours: nurturing ethnic identity towards activism versus suppressing it, leading to passivity or alignment with the majority. This dichotomy underlines that engagement with ethnic identity evolves into varying degrees of active expression. This process is inherent and evolving, akin to an awakening, and signifies a move from personal struggle to a collective endeavour for social change, marked by profound emotional and existential shifts. The phenomenon of racial and ethnic awakening, or increased awareness, is studied by researchers such as Neville and Cross (2017, 102–108).

Although empirical evidence from the narratives of the research participants reveals that the formation of ethnic identity is an individual process, it is deeply intertwined with collective experiences and historical contexts. The participants expressed that their personal experiences of discrimination and cultural revival are closely linked to collective movements for social change. This leads to an open discussion about whether those Indigenous persons who participated in the war did so as a result of postcolonial issues, which might be a topic for further investigation. Because the number of anti-war activists with Indigenous heritage is extremely small, making each case unique, it would not be correct to project their experience onto the entire population of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. Furthermore, due to oppressive circumstances within Russia, openly articulating an anti-war position is not legal. Thus, this might lead to different strategies in developing ethnicity and activism. This variation could become a topic for future research, examining how non-liberal contexts shape activist approaches among Indigenous Peoples.

Ethnic identity is inherently linked to the past (Romanucci-Ross 1995), yet it concurrently exists in both the present and the past. Engagement with historical narratives enables an understanding of an ethnic group's history, characterised by significant loss and suffering. This engagement, however, is constructed in the present, allowing for a critical re-evaluation of the systems in which the individual is embedded and a re-assessment of the past from a contemporary perspective. Such a process can elicit a range of emotions, including resentment, disappointment, hatred, anger and shock, which can subsequently act as catalysts for proactive measures aimed at altering the current state of affairs. Through this mechanism, Indigenous individuals are drawn into the process of social change.

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DEBATE ON DECOLONIALITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG YOUNG KALMYKS AND BURYATS WHO FLED TO MONGOLIA AFTER 2022

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In 2022–2023, there was a significant shift in discussions about minority languages and ethnic groups in Russia. This study examines discourses concerning the attitudes to the Russian state, the sense of belonging and the future of ethnic minorities. The paper is based on interviews with young people from Mongolian-speaking republics in Russia, Kalmykia and Buryatia who left for Mongolia after mobilisation was announced in 2022. Fleeing possible conscription into military service, living in a country with a similar culture and language, and sharing emigration experiences with other young people made their life in Mongolia a space for fruitful discussions about their experiences, history and the future of their ethnic groups. The sense of belonging is context-sensitive. The study shows that the views of young Kalmyks and Buryats consider both official and activist perspectives. Their narratives about the future of their republics are closely linked to personal decisions to leave, life experiences and family memories of their community's turbulent history. At the same time, the evolving perspectives of young people will shape future collective discourses among ethnic minorities.

KEYWORDS: sense of belonging, young Kalmyks, young Buryats, Mongolia, Russia

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the war with Ukraine, there has been a notable shift in discourses on ethnic minorities, both in the rhetoric employed by officials and ethnic activists, as well as in that of ordinary community members. Restricting the rights of ethnic minorities and emphasising Russian nationalism on a symbolic level has been ongoing for some time. In particular, amendments to the Russian constitution have included the formulation of "Russian as a state-building group and language" (State Duma 2020). These

trends have continued and intensified during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To emphasise national "unity" during the war, the authorities have adopted policies that reduce the autonomy of minority groups. For example, in September 2023, the Russian government withdrew from the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Postanovlenije 2023), which Russia joined in 1996.

Research on language activists conducted in 2019–2021 found that they tended to engage in linguistic and cultural projects, but avoided discussions of language rights (Baranova 2023; see a similar conclusion in Yusupova 2022, 2023). However, after the outbreak of war, many of them became more active in language advocacy or decolonial discussions (Baranova 2024). Ethnic activist media platforms are diligently working to legitimise and endorse such debates. In 2022–2023, many new projects emerged. Currently, the primary debate among language and ethnic activists in diasporas revolves around understanding the relationship between the state and minority groups, as well as exploring the concept of belonging.

Various stakeholders have now actively engaged with and contested these discussions. Despite the uncertainty surrounding who can authentically represent a community during times of war, these initiatives have been gaining influence within the international community. For instance, the 30th Annual Session of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe acknowledged the "forceful, ongoing and deliberate subordination of Indigenous and ethnic minority nations within the Russian Federation, which are denied equal rights and self-determination" (OSCE 2023, 35). Notably, the idea of ethnic republics seeking secession and achieving independence has become one of several possible scenarios for the future mentioned by experts.

Thus, the political context of the war introduces a new perspective on the relationship between ethnic minorities and the state as seen by officials, whereas ethnic and decolonial activists present an alternative viewpoint. How are these discourses structured, and which aspects of these discourses resonate with "ordinary" community members? The variety of beliefs and political views among the general population appear random, underlining the importance of figuring out what influences people to support or dispute a specific standpoint.

It should be noted that there is a disparity in mobilisation and death: members of ethnic minorities have a higher chance of going to war. This is evident in Buryatia (Bessudnov 2023; Vyushkova and Sherkhonov 2023). The threat to members of minority ethnic groups is rather high, which may influence their perceptions of belonging to the state. I examine these reflections using the example of a group directly affected by the war: young Kalmyks and Buryats who are subject to mobilisation and have decided to leave Russia (at least temporarily).

This study explores how and why respondents from two Mongolian-speaking areas, Kalmykia and Buryatia, speak about the future of their republics in the context

of the Russian-Ukrainian war and how they describe their sense of belonging. Do Indigenous people engage in identity discussions and align themselves with particular positions, and if so, what influences their position? More specifically, I examine how these positions are reflected in their narratives and how they relate their stance to external discourses, official propaganda and decolonial activism, as well as historical events or their biographies. The ensuing section deals with the study's methodology.

METHODOLOGY

Data and Methods

The paper is based on interviews with young Kalmyks and Buryats, comparing them to official discourse and the voices of decolonial activists.

Methodologically, selecting a sample for this research posed challenges due to the wide relevance of identity, belonging and the future structure of the republics. For the sake of safety, the sample was limited to individuals outside Russia. This determined the age range, as younger individuals (20–30 years old) tended to leave during the mobilisation[1]. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Those who emigrated to Mongolia were selected for the study. Buryats and Kalmyks primarily left Russia across the land borders to Mongolia and Kazakhstan. Some of my respondents initially crossed into Kazakhstan (the closest border for residents of Kalmykia) and then moved to Mongolia a few months later. Their choice of destination was influenced by linguistic and cultural proximity, as well as comparative accessibility. Mongolia is relatively affordable and has an open land border with Russia. Russian citizens can stay in Mongolia without a visa for 30 days. On 25 September 2022, immediately after the mobilisation was announced, the former president of Mongolia, Elbegdorj Tsakhia, appealed to Buddhists in Russia – Buryats, Kalmyks and Tuvinians – urging them to stay out of the war and promising residency in Mongolia for these groups (world mongol 2022). Although these promises were not fully realised, many respondents expected visa relaxations for co-ethnics. A total of 13,285 Russians moved to Mongolia in 2022 (Shirmanova 2023). While some eventually returned to Russia (Jonutytė 2023a), others remained in Mongolia or moved to different countries.

Although there is no data on the ethnic composition of these migrants, my observations and commentaries from activists who assisted them suggest that residents of border regions (the Altai Republic, Tyva, Buryatia and Zabaikalye Krai) predominated among those who moved to Mongolia. While there were also Russian residents

1 Moreover, attempts to conduct online interviews with Kalmyks currently residing in the republic who support the war proved unsuccessful due to trust issues.

from these regions, and Buryats and Kalmyks migrated to other countries as well, a significant group of Mongolian-speaking residents from Russia formed in Mongolia. The ethnic, historical, religious and linguistic affinity with Mongolians plays an important role in their identity. Therefore, Buryat and Kalmyk migrants to Mongolia are particularly interesting for understanding changing discourses.

I found the respondents using the snowball method, conducting a total of 15 in-depth online interviews and collecting several commentaries from other participants via voice message. All respondents were men because they were avoiding mobilisation. Among emigrants after 2022, there were both men and women (Kamalov et al. 2022). However, those who left in the autumn of 2022 were predominantly men (Exodus-22 2023), and among those who went to Mongolia, the absolute majority were young men of conscription age, particularly among Kalmyks and Buryats. Only one of my respondents moved with his family; the rest were unmarried and childless, or left their families in Russia. As Jonutytė (2023b) notes, family pressure – either their own or their parents' – often led them to return to Buryatia despite the continuing threat of mobilisation. Economically, my respondents are not very secure, and their choice of Mongolia was linked to their financial capabilities. Unlike many emigrants who moved to other countries in 2022 (to Armenia and Georgia, for instance, Exodus-22 2023), those who relocated to Mongolia generally did not have remote IT jobs and were seeking manual labour (for example, through a tree planting programme in Mongolia or by working for a few months at a car factory in South Korea) or unskilled remote work (such as in a call centre in Russia). Only a few had a high level of education and were able to (plan to) maintain their profession after retraining (for example, one respondent was a lawyer and wanted to learn the specifics of Mongolian law).

Kalmyks were chosen for analysis due to language proficiency and the author's previous work with the community (2006–2018), facilitating access to respondents. Despite familiarity with respondents or introductions through mutual contacts, the issue of trust was significant. The language in which the interviews took place was crucial as respondents were able to switch to their native language (as a field linguist, I speak Kalmyk and partly understand other Mongolic languages, e.g. Buryat).

I had originally planned to focus only on interviews with Kalmyks, but research showed that young people from Kalmykia and Buryatia often rent accommodation together in Ulaanbaatar. In the new context of emigration, they find themselves in a similar situation: natives of Russia who enter as tourists and apply for a residence permit in Mongolia, who are culturally and linguistically close to Mongolians, but who do not speak the standard Khalkha-Mongolian language. Temporary or permanent departure from Russia has created a circle of young people interested in discussing the situation. They discuss among themselves not only the everyday problems

of emigration but also the political and historical situation in Russia and their narratives influenced each other. I have therefore included a few interviews with Buryats from a common circle of migrants in Mongolia.

Representations of identity are largely influenced by individual experiences, so the study focuses on the personal narratives of Indigenous people from Kalmykia. Interviews dealt with various topics focusing more on the respondents' migration to Mongolia and adaptation there than the future of their native region. I analysed how people specifically discussed the future of Kalmykia (and, partly, Buryatia as another Mongolic-speaking region), but I preferred to avoid direct questions about the war and its consequences due to the danger for Russian citizens and possible fears among respondents. Usually, the respondents brought up the topic of the war when discussing other ethnic-related issues.

As an additional source of data, I used documents and statements from officials related to language and national policy and online discussions of decolonial activists (media, YouTube channels, video conferences, etc.). I captured intertextual references when respondents mentioned statements from ethnic activists, projects or Russian propaganda that had influenced them. Attention was paid to how these macro-narratives intertwined in interviews with the biographical circumstances or specific decisions of individuals, such as migration.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There are two dimensions of belonging: "emotional attachment", formed primarily through family relationships and biography (Yuval-Davis 2006) and the politics of belonging, that is, "a discursive recourse which constructs, claims, justifies or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion" (Antonsich 2010, 645; Cornips and de Rooij 2018). The resources or building materials for the second dimension, include various discourses concerning the past and present of the ethnic group. These discourses encompass perspectives from the state and activist realms, as mentioned earlier. However, these discourses are not static: individuals actively construct their own ideological frameworks from the ideas that are presented to them.

The development of a personal sense of belonging constitutes a complex domain intricately tied to the respondent's social position, communication networks and individual circumstances. The analysis does not attempt to comprehensively cover every aspect of the respondents' sense of belonging and ethnic identity. Instead, it focuses on examining the circumstances that respondents themselves identify as crucial in shaping their worldview and sense of belonging.

The discourses on the sense of belonging in the ethnic republics in Russia were far from political mobilisation. Describing Buryat's sense of belonging, Graber shows

that the most widespread discourse adopts the notion of autonomy within this multinational state and multiculturalism at the regional scale rather than the conception of "indigenous sovereignty or empowerment" (Graber 2020, 78). In a similar way, exploring the notions of identity and sovereignty in Siberia, Mandelstam Balzer (2021) does not find grounds for it. At the same time, she states that "identity can be crystallised through shattering events that force people to realign and rethink their loyalties" (Mandelstam Balzer 2021, 166). This may be the process we are witnessing now.

In the new media that ethnic activists in diasporas create, the notion of decolonisation plays an important role. For example, one of the movements is called "Decolonise Russia" and others often use this word to explain their programme. It should be emphasised that the understanding of decoloniality among activists may coincide, or it may differ from academic approaches and between different actors. For example, they may focus primarily on the political sense of the word, emphasising part of a broad decolonial approach as an "epistemic, political and ethical instrument" (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2009). In this paper, I will use the notion of decoloniality to refer primarily to the system of representations and knowledge they offer. According to Quijano (2007), the decolonial approach brings a "historical diversity of knowledge" that can transform an understanding of the roles of different groups or reconstruct memories and local histories (Tlostanova 2015).

Ordinary members of the community, however, are not passive recipients of ideology. The work of ethnic activists can also be perceived differently, remaining at the margins of community interests or offering, especially in moments of crisis, new explanations and discourses that shape identity and a sense of belonging. These ideas resonate most strongly among young people (as seen in different contexts, especially the Basque movement; Urla 2012).

The stances of young migrants from ethnic minorities are important because they will influence society in their republics of origin. To understand the influence of migrants on their countries of origin, the term "social remittances" has been coined (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). This encompasses a fusion of new practices, ideas and vocabulary. Emigrants play a crucial role in transmitting perceptions of societal structures shaped by their new experiences post-departure. This transmission occurs through various channels, including online platforms in digital diaspora settings and interactions facilitated by cross-border movements.

SOURCES AND RECEPTION OF DISCOURSES: OFFICIAL PROPAGANDA AND DECOLONIAL MEDIA

In this section, I outline the external sources shaping representations of Kalmyk and Buryat identities, as well as the relations between these republics and the state.

The analysis focuses on how these official and activist discourses become part of respondents' narratives about the structure of society and the future of the ethnic minority community. Two predominant discourses stand out: official propaganda and decolonial media. The key aspects of these discourses are briefly summarised below, with acknowledgement that they are not internally uniform.

The responses vary from direct references to specific media events or political statements during interviews to expressing shared views, such as "the state is currently oppressing our ethnic culture". This description aims to convey not only how the state's ethnic policy and opposition discourse on ethnic groups are structured but, more importantly, what resonates with the perspectives of my respondents.

Official Discourse

For Russia, during the war, national policy turns out to be one of the most important areas of activity. In 2022, reports emerged in the press indicating the need to develop a federal law on state national policy (that was not there before). During 2022–2023, a draft law was developed, but the text is currently unavailable. Reports by the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FADN) on working meetings emphasise discussion of "the powers of state authorities" and "a uniform approach to implementing state national policy" in all regions of Russia (FADN, 2023).

There is a distinction that emerged in the 1990s between ethnic *russkiĭ* (Russian) and civil *rossii͡anin* (citizens of the Russian Federation) identities. While everyday spoken language tends to favour the noun *russkiĭ*, officials stick to the term *rossii͡anin* to emphasise that they are addressing all citizens of the country, not just a specific ethnic group. Initially, this official terminology aimed to acknowledge the diversity within society. Laruelle and her colleagues show the gradual increase of *russkiĭ* instead of *rossii͡anin* in official discourses but consider it not as ethnonationalism, but rather, as the culturalisation of citizenship (Laruelle et al. 2022, 27). However, the surge in nationalist sentiments during the war has led to the erasure of the very concept of diversity and equality among ethnic cultures. The pro-war discourse increasingly defaults to labelling the inhabitants of Russia as *russkie* (Russians). For instance, in spring 2022 in Elista (Kalmykia), official pro-war banners carried the message, "I am a Kalmyk, but today we are all Russians." This shift in language usage reflects a growing tendency to emphasise Russian identity over the broader concept of a diverse, multi-ethnic nation.

Respondents sometimes refer directly to this case when talking about Russification and the erasure of identity: "[There will be a] chance [for a society] if rhetoric like, 'I am Kalmyk, but today we are all Russians,' diminishes and when our regional identity is no longer erased. We've been forced to forget about our constitution and even that we once had a president, haven't we?" (Timur, Buryat, 25). Another respondent, Kalmyk

Figure 1. "I am a Kalmyk, but today we are all Russians" (with the ethnic term russkie)

from Elista, commented on the reaction to this poster in his environment: "First of all, nobody liked it at all, because, well, we have never had it to the point where we are like: 'We're Russian.' We know who we are" (Artem, Kalmyk, 23). In addition to the nationalist discourse, official propaganda promotes the idea of a multi-ethnic nation. Thus, an important task of propaganda is to present the multinational character of the army or festivals of food, song and dance, and make official statements about the nature of the relationship between ethnic minorities and the state. A good example of this is provided by film clips put out by the FADN about the production of body armour, inclining that 'it doesn't matter whether we speak Russian, Khakas, Chuvash or Bashkir, we are all united by our love for the motherland and a great desire to help it" (FADN, 2022). This understanding is close to the Soviet notion of nationality, where different ethnic cultures together constituted one "nation". Respondents take this perception into account and are mostly critical of it.

Official discourse also uses the notion of "coloniality", though not in the same way as ethnic activists. Putin emphasises in many of his speeches that Russia is neither a colonial country nor an empire.

> In my opinion, what's the most important thing? The fact that we have never been colonisers anywhere. Our co-operation [with ethnic minorities] has always been built on an equal basis or on the desire to help and support [them]. And those countries that are trying to compete with us, including now, have pursued a completely different policy. (EEF 2023)

At the linguistic level, the vocabulary used in propaganda differs slightly from that of the opposition: official discourse speaks of "anti-colonialism" (mostly in Africa). For young Kalmyks, ideas are mostly sourced from opposition media.

Activists' Media and the New Agenda

In 2022–2023, online organisations with anti-war or decolonial goals emerged for nearly every ethnic group. The first such organisation was the Free Buryatia Foundation, which aimed to help individuals avoid being sent to the front, particularly during mobilisation. Similar organisations, such as Free Kalmykia and Free Yakutia, also operated in other republics, receiving financial and organisational support from their respective diasporas. Other organisations had a less direct approach, promoting the culture of the respective ethnic group.

Some projects aim to represent subethnic groups, for example, the podcast *Govorit Respublika* (the republic speaks) and the organisation *Aziaty Rossii* (Asians of Russia) discuss several "Asian" regions of Russia, for example Altai, Buryatia, Kalmykia, Khakasia, Tyva and Yakutia. The Telegram channel "The Indigenous of Russia" unifies all "Indigenous minorities". There are attempts to find a common identity and term for all ethnic minorities, for example, the design brand 4 Oirads created new merchandise in 2022 called Nerusskiĭ (non-Russians; see Figure 2), which became popular among different ethnic activists. The Telegram channels "Nerusskiĭ" and "Nerusskiĭ mir" (non-Russian world) reclaim the slurs and provide an umbrella term for all minorities, including migrants. Another channel, "Decolonise Russia", deals with all ethnic minorities in Russia, emphasising their understanding of decoloniality.

During 2022–2024, there was a process of searching for new terms for minority activists and new identities. The re-labelling of channels or movements mirrors this discussion. For example, the channel "Tozhe_rossii͡ane" (Russians citizens too) published a post about possibly renaming the channel. The author invited subscribers of the channel to vote for variants of the name (the old one or a number of new ones), expressing their identity: "The channel was conceived before the war, and at that time, the name *Tozhe_rossii͡ane* was chosen as provocative and inclusive and reconciling. Before the war, it still seemed that a return to civil unity from the already established Russian ethnostate was possible." As another example, an Instagram channel changed its name from "Free Kalmykia" to "Oirad Jisän" (Oirad movement):

> The new name is more decolonial and well-thought-out. The nam kalmyki [Kalmyks] was given to us in the russian empire [without capital letters], and the name we have given ourselves is the word *өөрд* or *ойрад*. We realise that it is not easy to give up the name Kalmyks, because many people associate themselves with it, so we will try to use the name *ойрат-калмыки* [Oirad-Kalmyks] in our writing.

Figure 2. Nerusskiĭ (Non-Russian) created by the design brand 4 Oirads. 2022 ©4Oirads (published with the author's permission)

New media facilitate online co-operation between activists who have emigrated to different countries. In particular, ethnic activists actively collaborate with each other and with other anti-war movements such as the Feminist Anti-war Resistance, and their understanding of the goals is transformed into a struggle for ethnic and linguistic rights. Some ethnic activists have also sought political representation and organised forums for representatives of potential independent states.

Discussions among activists in the diaspora are spreading to some extent among young people from ethnic republics, particularly from Kalmykia and Buryatia. Without delving into all the debates among activists here, only those cases mentioned by my respondents, "ordinary" Kalmyks or Buryats, are discussed below.

During the war, activists have problematised the situation of ethnic and linguistic minorities inside Russia. One of the important topics they address is the impossibility of preserving language and culture without fighting for linguistic rights, "because the right to learn a (minority) language is a political question" (from a blog of a language activist, spring 2022). Decolonial media often emphasise that the independence of the republic is important for the preservation of culture. Respondents also mentioned this close link between a separate state and language maintenance.

> Perhaps the collapse of Russia, the acquisition of independence or extended autonomy and possibly forced learning of the Kalmyk language, somehow might revive this whole tradition, just as Hebrew was revived in Israel. Maybe somehow their experience in self-identification in cultural and linguistic terms can help. I don't see any way out at the current moment except the possible disintegration of Russia. (Baatr, Kalmyk, 30)

It is important to note that leaving during mobilisation does not automatically imply an oppositional position or solidarity with the struggle for independence. An activist who helped organise departures during the mobilisation announcement pointed out that fear for their lives, both their own and their compatriots', led to the departures, irrespective of political views. "There was such an upsurge on the internet among different Kalmyk communities. And different people with different political views helped them. So, this big problem, which affected everyone, united many different people," says a Kalmyk activist (Darsen, 32, Mongolia/Germany).

One extremely important idea and even slogan found in opposition decolonial media is "this is not our war" (Sakha resistance, 2023-). The phrase was also repeated in some of the interviews.

> Well, I mean, there are, of course, people... In my environment, it was people of the older generation, my bosses, and so on, they were pro-war, *Z*. But everybody who was not related to my work, they were all against it. And they don't understand why it's necessary in general. That is, people have the feeling that this is not their war at all. That is, it is something [Ukraine] that the Slavs have not divided among themselves, but what does it matter to us? (Artem, Kalmyk, 23)

Reconsideration of the war as national/ethnic and the inclusion of the Kalmyks in the group of "Russians", in which they are not prepared to include themselves, evokes the opposite idea – distancing themselves in principle. When they say that this is a "Russian" or "Slavic" war, it means it is not about "us".

At the linguistic level, one can see how new words and concepts are spreading. Until 2022, I had not heard young Kalmyks use the terms decolonial, empire (except for the combination "Russian Empire") and related notions of the relationship between empire and oppressed groups. They have now entered the discourse, along with some slogans. While there are numerous subtle and concealed repetitions of independence movement slogans, some respondents tend to articulate their views more frequently by referencing media or distant organisations.

> I'm not in favour of separation at all; I'm in favour of self-determination. In the sense that I can't decide for all other Kalmyks how they should live. And this should be done democratically, with a referendum. If they want to live in Russia, let them live in Russia; if they don't, we'll work towards an independent Kalmykia. In this regard, I don't have this firm stance that we absolutely must separate and build our independent Kalmyk state, engaging in conflicts with all our neighbours [ironically]. That's more the stance of the members of congress and their rhetoric. (Darsen, Kalmyk, 32, Mongolia/Germany)

Defining too radical a position, the respondent distances himself from it, referring to the Congress of the Oirat-Kalmyk People (Kongress ojrat-kalmyckogo naroda), the organisation that participates in different meetings of The Forum of Free Nations of Post-Russia (*Forum svobodnykh gosudarstv Postrossii*).

The respondent often misattributed the idea, for example, in the excerpt below, of independence as part of a moderate NGO with a different agenda: "It's better to ask foreign agents, like 'Free Buryatia': they are actively engaged in this. I believe that if such discussions are taking place now, they have more of an informal nature, like kitchen talk. Most of these conversations about the need to leave separately or to join Mongolia, for instance, are happening abroad" (Timur, Buryat, 25).

Together with the emergence of decolonial media, there has been more discussion of racism and discrimination, both at the domestic and institutional level (e.g., prejudice has been addressed in the podcast *Govorit respublika*, *Beda-Media* and others). It should be noted that the level of ethnic and linguistic prejudice in Russian society is extremely strong (ECRI 1996–2022). At the same time, discussion of this situation has long been silenced in the ethnic republics. While respondents do not directly quote these media sources, they speak extensively and openly about experiences of discrimination that have affected them: "When even the cops, police officers [in Moscow] stop you, they are surprised that you have a Russian passport. What? You know, like, really? They are surprised that you don't look like a citizen of the Russian Federation" (Ayush, Kalmyk, 33).

In summary, the respondents did not align themselves explicitly with any particular political movement, including those advocating for the independence of the republic. However, various positions emerged in the interviews, evident in both logical connections and linguistic expressions. Notable instances include use of terms like "decolonial" and "empire", as well as discussion of the possibility of the republic's separation from Russia – even if the respondents did not endorse such a stance.

THE PAST AND FUTURE OF AN ETHNIC GROUP AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF BELONGING

A sense of belonging involves recognising the self as a member of some group. In this sense, the respondents often spoke explicitly about their desire to leave a group, not to be part of it: “Because of the war and mobilisation, I made a decision that I didn’t want to be part of this, how to say, part of Russia, part of Russian society, and I thought that I should try myself in another country” (Baatr, Kalmyk, 30). Their decision to emigrate is considered an act of identity. So, personal biography (i.e., departure to Mongolia) is constructed through a sense of (not) belonging to the state and responsibility.

The experience of emigration impacts identity. While the lives of Kalmyks and Buryats fleeing mobilisation in Mongolia are beyond the scope of this text, it is important to note that many emphasised cultural affinities: “It’s as if I were in Elista! The atmosphere, the vibe – it’s very similar. The same Mongolian faces, the same everything practically. As my Kalmyk friends used to joke, Ulaanbaatar would be Elista if it weren’t for Russia” (Artem, Kalmyk, 23). Some reflected on ideas of pan-Mongolism and the concept of a unified state for various Mongolian groups, whereas others specifically highlighted Kalmyk and Buryat identities in Mongolia. Notably, some objected to the term “Western Mongols” (adopted in Mongolia) for Oirats/Kalmyks.

The fieldwork occurred after recent and sudden relocation, making it difficult for my interlocutors to define their plans and status. One person might say he wanted to return to Kalmykia, stay in Mongolia or travel the world. They avoided using terms related to mobility status (e.g., “emigration”, “refugee” or “temporary departure”). If they did use any terms, they referred to “escape” or “running away”. This ambiguity is also seen among other groups of emigrants from Russia after 2022, such as those in Armenia and Georgia (Baranova and Podolsky 2023). However, unlike Russians in the South Caucasus, Kalmyks and Buryats did not consider their choice of destination, Mongolia, to be random. Some respondents had previously visited Mongolia or had considered the possibility of living there.

In conversations about the future of the region, research participants often referred to historical events. The memory of the group’s past was often used to maintain different perspectives on the post-war organisation of the country or to justify individual decisions to participate in the war or not, to go abroad or not. For the Kalmyks, a significant moment in understanding their belonging to the state was the deportation in 1943–1957. The deportation significantly impacted the community’s ethnic and linguistic identity (Guchinova 2005, Baranova 2009). The deportation became a collective trauma for Kalmyks, perpetuating this memory through three generations (Guchinova 2005, 15). Any biographical narrative revolves around

the memory of deportation, whether experienced directly or, typically, through relatives. An activist mentioned the trauma as a reason to fear participation in anti-war protests: "Well, it seems to me that we still have a post-genocidal trauma, because, let's say, any protest in our minds is triggered by December '43. That is, I heard it with my own ears, that the Russians would come again, deport everyone, kill everyone, and so on" (Badma, Kalmyk, 28).

Most respondents discuss the deportation in the context of their anti-war position or their decision to flee: "From my childhood, I was taught that this is bad, that war is bad, that it will never, will never lead to anything good, and my ancestors, grandmothers, grandfathers, *ava-eeji* [grandparents in Kalmyk] were deported because of the war. And they were all exiled, exiled, born in exile" (Maxim, Kalmyk, 29).

Another respondent says that he does not understand how their grandparents did not flee (although he does not take into account the real possibilities of emigration from the USSR):

> And after the exile. How was it possible? […] the actions of these Soviet authorities are so terrible. *Aava-eeji* there were such terrible things experienced, well, even from the stories that I don't understand why they didn't leave, didn't leave everything, didn't flee the country. And so, for me, I decided to run away, not to be part of Russia. (Baatr, Kalmyk, 30)

Thus, when they discuss the ethnic group or its history, they relate these events to their situation.

It was noted above that moving and socialising with other young compatriots was cited as a moment when they reflected on the political order. Some respondents state that the war with Ukraine was the starting point for reconsideration of their identity and their circle: "In fact, if you think about it, it's a shock to the public. And if there was no such shock, people probably wouldn't think about it" (Mergen, Buryat, approx. 30). At the same time, some participants talked about their previous life and, primarily, the experience of discrimination that was a starting point for thinking about independence:

> But, in general, I honestly want us to have our own independence... I do not perceive... as everyone says "Mother Russia" is like a stepmother for me, probably [laughs] not a mother. Because when you go outside Kalmykia, you feel that you catch a lot of sidelong glances. Let's put it this way. [...] So I think it will be very hard, but, in general, it will probably be better for the people if we are independent and live separately from Russia. (Maxim, Kalmyk, 29)

Another respondent attributed his interest in the independence of the republic to his passion for history. He also mentioned communication with customers in his ethnic clothes and goods shop and previous trips to Mongolia:

> I'm a historian by education, I took part in all sorts of history competitions at school. And I realise that if we lived on our own before, without all the telephones and credit cards, with three sheep and two camels, then we can live on our own now. And then we started travelling to Mongolia, and it all became clear at once how colonised we were in everything – in language, in culture, even in everyday life, how to tie a horse properly and so on. You have to stir the *chigyan* [koumiss in Kalmyk] with a spoon to make it more tart. And you realise that you have been colonised so much that you don't even know some simple things. (Darsen, Kalmyk, 32, Mongolia/Germany)

The research participant sees his professional and personal life story as a continuous means of establishing a connection with his ethnic group and addressing past experiences of indignity. While the exact timing of these perceptions is not specified, the current narrative offers a framework to envision the future through this perspective. The language used ("how colonised we were in everything") enables him to articulate and comprehend both the past and future. Moreover, he shares this narrative with other young Kalmyks and Buryats, providing them with a tool to understand their own experiences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how the positions of young Kalmyks and Buryats emerge at the intersection of official and activist discourses, taking into account individual decisions and the group's turbulent history. The decision to avoid mobilisation and leave Russia largely shapes their narrative.

Hegemonic, monolingual language ideologies and dominant mainstream discourses which emphasise homogeneity have led to the neglect of linguistic and ethnic diversity (Piller 2015). Amidst the war, the official discourse constructs a narrative of voluntary national unity, establishing a hierarchy among ethnic groups, with "Russians" placed in a superior position. Ethnic activists counter this narrative by shedding light on instances of Soviet and post-Soviet ethnic repression.

The discourse on minority status during the war expanded beyond activists to encompass a broader audience. The diaspora became a forum for discussing the history and future of the ethnic group. The interviews revealed how terminology typically associated with ethnic activists' media is entering the lexicon of "ordinary people", notably terms like "colony" and "empire", to describe the relationship between Russia and the republics.

This study captures a specific cross-section of how new discourses and a sense of belonging are formed in the specific context of recent, sudden and effectively forced migration or temporary departure. This explains why all significant moments of family or collective history are connected to the current situation or the decision not to participate in the war. Beyond the context of mobility, however, the sense of belonging is closely linked to individual biographies and narratives.

The respondents' positions are shaped by the official discourse, new opposition media aligned with a decolonial agenda and communication with other Kalmyks and Buryats who fled Russia. These factors affect each person differently, carrying distinct meanings for each individual. This text refrains from summarising various views on the post-war dispensation, but the respondents mentioned the development of regional identity, federalism, a referendum determining the fate of the republic and full independence. The distribution of these assessments reflects not so much a political stance but rather the voices they currently hear, associated with events from their lives or the history of their family and ethnic group. The most important consequence for the future of society is that this conversation has begun, and different discourses provide different perspectives for understanding the sense of belonging to the group and the state. Young people choose their understanding of identity, with which they will then live in the community.

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THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: ORIENTALISATION OF SIBERIAN ETHNIC MINORITIES AT WAR ON UKRAINE

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This paper explores the orientalisation of Siberian ethnic minorities who have actively participated in the war on Ukraine[1]. The overrepresentation of Buryats and Tuvans within the Russian army has sparked public discussions in Ukraine and Russia about the relations of Siberian minorities with the Russian state. This study is a starting point in analysing the relationship between the state, nationalism and ethnic minorities in contemporary Russia, particularly in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The orientalisation of Siberian ethnic minorities is interpreted as a significant aspect of a broader national and cultural boundary construct between Russian and Ukrainian societies. The research focuses on two key areas: (1) an examination of discursive representations of Siberian minorities in both Ukrainian and Russian media and (2) an exploration of the process of national and cultural differentiation between Russian and Ukrainian societies.

KEYWORDS: Siberian ethnic minorities, Tuva, Buryatia, war in Ukraine, Russia, decolonisation, ethnic soldiering, orientalisation, self-orientalism

At the beginning of the war, Buryat and Tuva soldiers became the face of the Russian aggression on Ukraine in media coverage. Since the onset of military activity in 2014, special attention has been paid by Ukrainian and Western observers to the presence of Siberian ethnic minorities within the militias of the Donetsk and Luhansk

1 This article is the result of research conducted as part of the project titled "Anti-War Activism Among Ethnic Minorities from Russia," implemented under the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) Intervention Grant BPN/GIN/2024/1/00015.

People's Republics. In the first months of the full-scale invasion in 2022, frequent emphasis in Ukrainian and Western media was placed on the disproportionate number of Siberian minorities among the Russian soldiers killed or captured. This partially available data became a contentious topic regarding the numbers of soldiers fighting and falling (Dugar de Ponte 2022). Analyses of the mortality of Russian soldiers in the first months of the full-scale war showed that the proportion of Buryats and Tuvans among the killed military personnel was four times greater than their share in the overall Russian population (Bessudnov 2022: 887), or even seven to ten times greater (Vyushkova and Sharkhanov 2023). However, it should be noted that in the first months of the war, Russian soldiers of Asian descent (mainly Buryats and Tuvans) were also overrepresented in Ukrainian and Western media. The reasons why Buryats and Tuvans became an *idée fixe* of the media and Ukrainian internet channels are the subject of this analysis.

This article aims to shed light on the role of social representations pertaining to Siberian minorities in the process of societal differentiation during the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. To this end, social representations of Siberian minorities were systematically examined across Ukrainian and Russian media outlets. The phenomenon of orientalisation was investigated as part of a broader process of national and cultural differentiation between Russian and Ukrainian societies. Special attention is paid to the orientalisation and self-orientalisation of Siberian ethnic groups. This paper attempts to explain how the decolonial discourse in Ukraine does not hinder the generation of orientalising representations of subaltern groups inhabiting other peripheries of the post-Soviet space. The conceptual framework of social representations proposed by Serge Moscovici was invoked in the analysis. Social representations are performative, serving not merely to reflect reality but also to actively shape it. They emerge through processes of anchoring and objectification. The anchoring involved naming, classifying and adapting a group to native imaginaries and cognitive schemata. Objectification occurred through the concretisation of the representation using fixed themes, metaphors and symbols, creating an imaginative core for the group (Moscovici 2011, 454-455). In the case of the examined social representations, one can hypothesise that social representations were primarily shaped by the media and social networks (Durani 2023). Because the discourses and ideological frameworks I study actively use postcolonial and decolonial terminology, I will refer to postcolonial theory (Loomba 2015, 19-111), although the local context of using these terms sometimes deviates drastically from the original assumptions of the founders of postcolonial studies.

Empirical research inside a state engaged in war requires the application and development of mixed methods research. For security reasons, in this case, this research did not involve interviewing Russian soldiers in Ukraine but focused rather on their native communities. Within this framework, different methods of remote ethnography (Postill 2017) were combined: the analysis of media discourse (Dijk 1993), field

research conducted among Siberian immigrants, and netnography – ethnographic research techniques applied via the internet (Kozinets 2020). In the research process, I utilised field experience and contacts with research partners gained during fieldwork on public history in Buryatia and Tuva conducted between 2014 and 2019. In the first half of 2024, unstructured interviews were also conducted with Ukrainian activists involved in decolonisation. From May 2022 to November 2023, interviews with immigrants in the European Union, online interviews and monitoring of local media and social networks were conducted. In January 2024, in collaboration with the organisation Asians of Russia and anthropologist Kamil Wielecki from Warsaw University, 16 interviews were conducted in Tuva and Buryatia[2] in addition to 20 online interviews with residents of these regions. An online survey was also conducted (573 respondents), along with an analysis of local groups on the social media platform VK. The research focused on the attitudes of Buryats and Tuvans towards the war and its impact on their lives. My language skills enabled me to conduct interviews and analyse online content in Ukrainian, Buryat and Russian. For the Tuvan language, I used translations provided by a field researcher from Asians of Russia[3].

THE DECOLONIAL AGENDA AND ORIENTALISM IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Since the beginning of the war, the postcolonial frame has become widely disseminated among the Ukrainian side and pro-independence activists from Siberian ethnic minorities. Naturally, the postcolonial discourse was represented in Ukraine and Russia by both local scholars and foreign authors adapting postcolonial studies to the study of Eastern European history (see Hrabovych 1994, Shkandrii 2004, Velychenko 2004, Thompson 2000, Sinchenko and Havrylovska 2014 and Etkind 2011). Some authors publishing there characterised the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity as the "first postcolonial revolution" in the post-Soviet space (Gerasimov 2014). In Ukrainian literature and essays of the 1990s and 2000s, the postcolonial discourse was present in the works of mainstream writers such as Yurii Andrukhovych, Oksana Zabuzhko and Mykola Riabchuk. Nevertheless, one might get the impression that the postcolonial lexicon has recently departed from the intellectual salons and permeated mainstream political discourse. Previously, as asserted by David Moore, postcolonial researchers did not engage in discussions about Soviet space due to Marxist sympathies that prompted them to explore an effective alternative to

2 To ensure the safety of field researchers and their informants, interviews were completely anonymous, covert, unstructured and conducted among the family and closest acquaintances of the activists. Researchers were trained in the principles of safe research conduct.

3 The researchers consented to the use of their translations but decided to remain anonymous.

global capitalism within the framework of socialist economics (Moore 2001). For many Western scholars, situating Siberian nationalities within postcolonial discourse has been challenging because it remained unclear whether the Soviet project can be considered a form of imperialism (Graber 2020, 30). According to Julia Buyskykh, Western anthropologists until recently failed to recognise the subaltern situation of Ukraine as a "former 'white' colony of Russian and Soviet empires" and unreflectively adopted the point of view of the Russian hegemon (Buyskykh 2023, 62-63). In contrast, scholars from former socialist states nurtured their emerging European identity, deliberately sidestepping comparisons between their experiences and those of researchers from the Global South, preferring to speak not of a postcolonial, but of a "post-dependence" situation (Thompson 2011, 290-301).

Apart from the political dimension, decolonisation in Ukraine is also understood as a broad process not limited to the emancipation from political and economic dependencies but also including liberation from the cultural hegemony of the colonial centre. Epistemic decolonisation involves examining and overcoming the power structures and knowledge inequalities that have been established by colonial systems (cf. Chakrabarty 2000, and Mingo 2009). The specificity of the decolonial discourse in Ukraine lies in the fact that the decolonisation programme is associated with the idea of "returning to Europe" and distancing itself from Russia, defined as the antithesis of European values. The ideologists of Ukrainian decolonisation agree with Aleksandr Dugin's geopolitical concept of Eurasia as distinct from Europe, governed by the "Russian World" and forming an ostensibly standalone Russian civilisation. However, they believe that Ukraine should not be part of this civilisation. A peculiarity of the decolonisation discourse in Ukraine is that it is not anti-European. On the contrary, the ultimate result of decolonisation and emancipation from Russian political and economic dominance as well as cultural hegemony is full membership in the European community (Polishchuk 2020, 76-81).

In this postcolonial situation (cf. Riabchuk 2013) of blurred cultural boundaries, where a significant segment of Ukrainians use the Russian language in daily life, it is worth referring to Fredrik Barth's concept of ethnic boundary, understood as the social organisation of cultural differences (1969). In the case of Ukrainian differentiation from Russians, one can posit that it occurs through a multidimensional (racial, cultural, civilisational, historical) orientalisation. Relatively few Siberian minorities play a crucial role in orientalising Russians as a radically distinct group. In Edward Said's notion, orientalism is a mode of perceiving and representing the East through a distorted lens that emphasises the exotic, backward, uncivilised and, at times, dangerous qualities that make them fundamentally different from the West and portray the alien as a mirror image of Western norms. Orientalisation is the process whereby the traditions and characteristics of Eastern cultures are essentialised, reified and presented in an

ahistorical manner, leading to the creation of static and stereotypical images of these cultures. Essentialism reduces complex, dynamic societies to static caricatures based on presumed inherent qualities that supposedly resist change regardless of historical developments or empirical evidence. The concept of orientalisation describes a systematic framework employed by Western thought, literature and academia to manage and construct a perception of the Orient that emphasises its supposed inferiority and justifies Western dominance over it (Said 1994, 43-70). In the current case, Russian soldiers with Asian origins are depicted as savage, bloodthirsty and blindly obedient to authoritarian power, in contrast to freedom-loving, democratic and civilised Ukrainians – genuine Europeans. This essentialised image of the enemy allows for the construction of a civic, European national identity for Ukrainians, which is juxtaposed against Russians. It must be acknowledged that orientalism is not merely a tool of Western dominance. In this instance, it is used by the victims of military aggression as a reactive measure of differentiation, set against the Russian discourse of national unity between Russians and Ukrainians. The Buryats, Sakha and Tuvans, on the one the hand, serve as tangible evidence of the essential Asian character of Russian civilisation and, on the other, they are a metonymy for all of Russia.

When considering the self-representation of Siberian nations, one must refer to the concept of self-orientalism. According to Stuart Hall, the power of colonialism was that it made the colonised see and experience themselves as the Other (Hall 1997, 259). Self-orientalism refers to the process by which individuals or communities from formerly colonised regions internalise and perpetuate the stereotypical images and narratives constructed by colonial powers. It is the process by which individuals or groups adopt and reinforce the essentialised and exoticised images of their own culture as constructed by external, often colonial or Western, perspectives. This is done to gain certain strategic advantages, such as economic benefits or greater acceptance within the dominant culture. Self-orientalism can be both a form of resistance and acceptance of dominant discourses as it allows for the negotiation of one's identity within the context of global power relations (Dirlik 1996, 111-114; Ong 2017, 125-131). Essentialisation and self-orientalism play a significant role in the commodification of ethnic identity, whereby ethnic culture becomes a product of the tourism industry (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 31-33). As regards the self-orientalisation of Siberian ethnic groups during wartime, we observe a loyal acceptance of an assigned exotic representation by the state and its use for empowering their social position.

ENSLAVED NATIONS

When considering the social representations of Siberian ethnic groups in the Russo-Ukrainian war, we must pay attention to the three main media paths generating

them: Ukrainian media, Russian media and self-representations in Russian media[4]. Two fundamental processes can be distinguished in the examined social representations disseminated in the Ukrainian information space: externalisation and orientalisation. Externalisation involves attributing similar political goals and relations with the authorities in Moscow to the ethnic groups from Siberia. In the discourse, Siberian groups play the role of "enslaved nations" who will resist colonial oppression and dismantle Russia from within (Kotubei-Herutska 2022, Oliinyk andet al. 2022). Siberian ethnic groups are supposed to gain national self-awareness and strive to create independent states, burying the artificial conglomerate of the multicultural empire. In this discourse, the international norm is the nation-state. The media discourse here focuses on the subordinate status of minorities, who are used as cannon fodder in Moscow's imperial war – "the prison of nations". Ukrainian media actively discuss and support the emigrant independence projects of Russian minorities advocating for the decolonisation of Russia by dividing it into national states (Kraliuk 2022). Ukrainian media constantly speculate about Russia's breakup:

> It is possible to expect the creation of a federation of the Volga and Kama ethnic groups – it will unite oppressed nations with populations smaller than Tatarstan or Bashkortostan. Siberia may establish another flexible supranational structure under economic control and political protectorate from China. The competition for influence in the post-Soviet space will unfold between Turkey, Azerbaijan and perhaps Kazakhstan (Turkic nations), China (Siberia) and Ukraine (North Caucasus, Kuban, Volga, central Russia). Once initiated, the liberation movement will encompass a maximum number of regions, leaving within Russia (Moscovia) only the territories that associate themselves with the Russian narrative and lack strategies to break away from imperial logic. (Sumlennyi 2023)

Within this discourse, the war in Ukraine will catalyse the second phase of the empire's decolonial disintegration into nation-states – a process that began with the dissolution of the USSR (Bazhan 2022). High-ranking state officials declare such forecasts to be the goals of Ukraine's foreign policy. The highly media-active Chief of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine , Kyrylo Budanov, who in December 2022 presented a political map of Russia fragmented into smaller states and territories annexed by neighbours (Sushko 2022). The Verkhovna Rada's resolution on 18 October 2022, recognising the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria as an independent state

4 Certainly, the number of paths can be increased and diversified by adding European, Asian, American, post-socialist and Russian independent media. The analysis of these media entities extends beyond the limits of this paper.

occupied by the Russian Federation (Xotyn 2022), is considered a political performative act aimed at the disintegration of Russia.

Since the beginning of the war, interviews with anti-war activists living in exile have started appearing in Ukrainian media. Coming from various ethnic groups such as Buryats, Tuvans and Sakha-Yakuts, they have formed horizontal bonds and established organisations like the Asians of Russia and the League of Free Nations. In Ukrainian media, they strive to counteract essentialisation and deconstruct the negative social representation of Siberian nations. These activists consistently employ a postcolonial dictionary and advocate for the detachment of Siberian republics from Russia, calling for the creation of independent nation-states.

Militarily insignificant but remarkable from a propaganda standpoint was the formation of the Siberia Battalion within the International Legion[5], where representatives of Siberian nations serve, recruited among prisoners of war. Vladislav Ammosow, a former officer oof Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) from Sakha-Yakutia, initially commanded the battalion. In interviews, the soldiers of the battalion described the Russian Federation as a racist, colonial state – a prison of nations – and declared that they would fight for their right to freedom (Serdjuk 2023). In contrast to other battalions formed by Russian citizens, such as the Russian Freedom Legion, Russian Volunteer Corps and National Republican Army, the creation of the Siberia Battalion elicited a nervous reaction from Russian opposition politicians, who voiced their objection to the separatist ideology of the battalion.

ORIENTALISATION OF SIBERIAN MINORITIES

The analysis of Ukrainian media discourses traces the process of forming social representations among Russian soldiers from Siberian minorities to be traced. The first media mentions of Siberian minorities appeared at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Crimea in February 2014 when, among the recordings made by Crimean residents of the "polite people", soldiers of "East Asian appearance" emerged. This fact began to be cited as evidence that the so-called little green men were not local separatists but units of the Russian army (Vyushkova, Sharkhanov 2023). Soon after, an increasing number of Buryat soldiers "on furlough" were identified among

5 Units of the International Legion under Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence consists of volunteers with foreign citizenship: the Russian Volunteer Corps (Russians), the "Freedom of Russia" Legion (Russians), the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment (Belarusians), the Siberian Battalion (Buryats, Sakha) and the Georgian National Legion. Separately, there is the International TRO Legion, created via the initiative of the president of Ukraine. It includes, among others, the Normandy Brigade (Ukrainians of Canada), the Sheikh Mansur Battalion and the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion (Bondaruk 2023).

the separatist militia in Donbas. Buryats became the collective image of all Siberian minorities sent by Russia under the guise of Russian volunteers and Donbas militias formed by "miners and tractor drivers".

Personified Buryat soldiers, identified by name, became the protagonists of entire newspaper cycles and viral videos used to expose the involvement of professional Russian soldiers in the war in Donbas while simultaneously creating the stereotype of a foolish and cruel Buryat – Russian cannon fodder. In February 2015, a recording of Russian singer Iosif Kobzon's visit to a hospital in Donetsk went viral. During the visit, he conversed with Dorzhi Batomunkuev, a severely burned Buryat tank crewman. The singer's awkward phrase, "Oh, you are Buryat – that brings me great joy", while speaking to a man with a horribly burned face, illustrated the cynical attitude of Russian authorities towards their soldiers. A Buryat volunteer Vladimir Andanov, known as Wacha, was even more popular on the Ukrainian internet. This soldier often recorded and posted videos of his activities in Donbas and readily gave interviews. Ukrainian authorities accused him of murdering Ukrainian war prisoners. Confident and brash, Wacha became the face of the Russian occupiers' barbarity and cruelty.

The Buryat issue was also addressed by Russian propaganda. In 2015, the pro-Kremlin youth organisation *Set'* (Network) produced an appeal from Buryat students to the Ukrainian people, refuting rumours about the participation of Buryat soldiers in the conflict in Donbas. In the video, the youth ironically called themselves "Putin's combat Buryats" and argued that Chechens, Buryats and Russians in Donbas are just a phantasmagoria created by "intimidated Ukrainians" deluded by the "oligarchic junta". The Buryat appeal was interpreted in Ukraine as subversive, becoming a classic example of the primitivism and absurdity of Russian propaganda, and the term "Putin's combat Buryats" began to be used to refer to all representatives of Siberian minorities in the Russian army.

The final anchoring in the social representation of the wildness and "bloodthirstiness" (*krovozherlyvist* in Ukrainian) of Siberian ethnic minorities occurred after the revelation of genocide in Bucha and Irpin. The blame for the crimes was attributed, among others, to Russian units from Khabarovsk and Pskov, which had multi-ethnic compositions. Initially, in the media, responsibility for the massacre was placed on Buryats and Tuvans (Vyushkova and Sharkhanov 2023). Representatives of Siberian ethnic minorities in the Russian army thus began to serve as tangible evidence of the Asian, horde-like character of the Russian state. Photographs were shown of soldiers with Asian facial features holding the flag of the Republic of Sakha, and it was claimed that the "Buryats" were responsible for the massacre because, "along with the Kadyrovites, they are the cruellest villains in the horde army" (Vynohradova 2022). The Siberian people were almost exclusively blamed for the crimes against civilians, the torture of prisoners and looting. The article, titled "Tuva is Coming or the Horde of Executioners in Galoshes", read as follows:

> Marauders sent their loot to Rubtsovsk, Kyzyl, Chita, Ulan-Ude and other cities in eastern Siberia and Transbaikalia. Several battalion tactical groups were formed based on these regions belonging to the Eastern Military District of the Russian Federation. According to witnesses of the brutal events, it was the Buryats, Khakass and, especially, the Tuvans who revelled in the sense of impunity and the killing of innocent victims. Very young men seemed to delight in the process of intimidating and taking the lives of everyone around them (Voloshyn 2022).

Russian Asians, as the radical Other, help reinforce the differentiation (on different levels – civic, civilisational, ethnic, cultural and racial) between the citizens of Ukraine and Russia. The Significant Other represents what the in-group does not want to be and embodies the negative traits rejected and not accepted by the group (Buchowski 2020: 73). The media behaviour of individual soldiers and young Putinists was quickly attributed to entire ethnic groups. Thus, before the Russian invasion in 2022, a figurative scheme to associate Siberian minorities with cruelty, savagery, stupidity and uncritical compliance with Russian ideology had already been constructed. Such socially constructed representations were linked to a new historical policy in which Russia presented itself as a thief of history. Muscovy, as a continuation of the Golden Horde, conquered the true Rus'-Ukraine and usurped the right to its historical heritage.

ORIENTALISATION OF RUSSIA

The orientalisation of Siberian ethnic groups involves the figure of the radical Other – the face of Russian brutality and the embodiment of Russian as the genetic, institutional and cultural heir of the Golden Horde. The theory of the radical distinctiveness of Russians is not new. It was promoted by Franciszek Duchiński, a 19th century Polish historian and ethnographer from Ukraine operating in Paris, who referred to Muscovites as a Turanian race, who differed from Europeans and "real" Ruthenians in appearance and mentality. He argued that Muscovites have a non-European despotic form of governance, the presence of an Asian collectivist community and a tendency towards nomadism. They illegitimately appropriated the name *Rus'*, which rightfully belongs only to Ukrainians (Górny 2014, 99-115). At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, in his monumental ten-volume work *History of Rus'-Ukraine*, the Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky presented Ukraine-Rus' as the true successor of the pre-Mongol Rus' state, laying the foundations for Ukrainian national historical policy. The theory of the stolen name and history of Rus' was subsequently promoted in Ukrainian historical journalism after the country had gained its independence in 1991 (see Dashkevych 2013).

After 2014, the discourse of the Muscovite Horde became the dominant reactive discourse in Ukraine's public sphere, serving as a counter-discourse to the Russian thesis portraying Ukrainians as a nation invented in the 19th century by Austro-Hungarian politicians.

In 2014, the Ukrainian television channel Ukraine aired a documentary series titled *Ukraine. In Search of Itself*. The series presented the idea of cultural and genetic symbiosis between the residents of Moscow and Sarai (the capital of the Golden Horde). Ivan III was described as the organiser of a political upheaval within the Horde. During the same period, Ukrainian historians and publicists promoted a "stolen history" discourse in which the real Rus was today's Ukraine, and Russia was the heir of the Golden Horde – a Eurasian cultural hybrid composed of heterogeneous Finno-Ugric, Slavic and Tatar-Mongol components. This stolen history became the official interpretation of Ukrainian historiography. The Horde also appeared in cinema. In 2019, the British-Ukrainian blockbuster *The Rising Hawk* was released, adapting the historical novel *Zakhar Berkut* by a celebrated Ukrainian writer Ivan Franko (Franko 1944). *The Rising Hawk* tells the story of the betrayal of the Carpathian Rus' elite and the struggle of the Carpathian Rus' against the Tatar-Mongol invaders, drawing clear parallels to the current events in Ukraine. The identification of Russia with the Golden Horde intensified with the beginning of the invasion, and the term "Hordians" became widely used on major Ukrainian TV channels in reference to Russian soldiers and politicians. In his address to the nation on the 50th day of the Russian invasion, President Volodymyr Zelensky explicitly articulated the idea of Russia's Horde lineage, pointing to the barbaric shelling of Ukrainian cities as evidence: "Rus' would not ruin itself. It was done by outsiders – Orda and other invaders. Here is who has arrived on our land. And they fight in the same way – to plunder and destroy" (Mazurenko 2022).

On social media, theories are promoted suggesting that the Russian language is an artificial conglomerate of Finno-Ugric, Kipchak, Mongolian and Old Church Slavonic languages, invented and codified by the Russian Academy, Mikhail Lomonosov, Nikolay Karamzin and Alexander Pushkin; this artificial language was then disseminated through schools and other state institutions in the Russian Empire.

> At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this curious entity emerged based on Old Church Slavonic foundations, with lexical elements from Tatar, Polish and Ukrainian; pronunciation influenced by the Mokshan language; and syntactic structures resembling French, known as the Great Russian Language (Karpanov 2023).

Prior to the codification, the spoken language in Moscow was purportedly a Tatar-Slavic creole, a notion believed to find its reflection in the historical literary

monument *A Journey Beyond the Three Seas* – travel notes made by Afanasy Nikitin, a merchant from Tver, during his journey to India in 1466–1472 (Karpanov 2023). Therefore, we are dealing with the alienation of Russia at the levels of language, culture, history and political institutions. The orientalising discourse attempts to transform the colonial centre that dictates aesthetics, cultural norms and behavioural patterns into the periphery of European civilisation.

The opposition of Ukraine-Rus' versus Russia-horde has been naturalised and no longer causes controversy in Ukraine. It is part of the war's historical policy. The "hordisation" of Russia is a component in the radical differentiation and othering of Ukrainians from Russians, a fundamental element in nation-building. This differentiation has proven to be a necessary defensive mechanism, as Putin justified the invasion of Ukraine by claiming that Ukrainians are part of the Russian nation, and the supposed distinctiveness of Ukrainians was invented in the 19th century by Poles and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Putin 2021). In turn, Ukrainians collected over 25,000 petition signatures urging the president to change the official name of the Russian state to the Moscow Federation, or Moscovia (Shakhvorostova 2023), while a less popular petition demanded the official name in Ukrainian be changed to "Orda". From a broader perspective, a significant part of the Ukrainian intelligentsia is attempting a persuasive procedure similar to what Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera and Jenö Szücs did, promoting the concept of a "kidnapped" Central Europe entirely distinct from Russia and the USSR : culturally, historically and politically (Todorova 1997, 140-160). Russian and Soviet cultural influences are reinterpreted within the framework of postcolonial theory (see Riabchuk 2013), and the cultural and political task of Ukrainian society is to overcome the postcolonial condition, return to Europe and reclaim its expropriated history from Russia – an Asian state originating from the Golden Horde (Pakhlovska 2008, 64, 398). Paradoxically, the orientalisation of Russia is one of the decolonisation strategies wherein the opposition between the great Russian culture and history and marginalised, folk Ukrainian culture without a tradition of statehood is overcome.

RUSSIAN DISCOURSE ON SIBERIAN MINORITIES AT WAR

In the state-controlled Russian media, soldiers from Siberia are presented as heroes – homeland defenders. Accusations of war crimes are denied, and all such information is treated as absurd elements of Ukrainian propaganda. On the contrary, information about Russian prisoners being tortured by "Ukrofascists" is presented. A Buryat soldier with the call sign "Kyakhta" shared his motivation for participating in the so-called Special Operation Z: "Two of my grandparents fought in World War II – they

were wounded. I decided to follow in their footsteps. After all, a soldier is there to defend the state's borders – its sovereignty" (Voennoslužaŝij 2023).

Based on this statement, one can understand how, in Russian propaganda, the boundary between the territories of Ukraine and Russia has recently been blurred, a situation attempted to be further legitimised by officially annexing the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia in October 2022.

In an interview, another soldier with the call sign "Buryat" recounts that the population of Ukraine initially feared Buryats because Ukrainian soldiers frightened them with stories. However, after he shared Buryat traditions and his mother's advice to treat civilians well during the war, people liked him and cried when he left (Tararuev 2022). Such "frontline testimonies", usually difficult to verify, aim to highlight the cruelty of Ukrainians and mobilise enraged compatriots to join the ranks of the Russian armed forces. The belief in the particular cruelty of Ukrainian soldiers towards prisoners of war from Asian regions of Russia seems to be well-established among representatives of Siberian minorities. For example, a respondent from Ulan-Ude stated the following:

> This war is terrible, and we all wish it would end. It is a pity for Ukraine, but on the other hand, they castrate our Buryats when they fall into captivity. Everyone here is outraged by that, and many of our guys volunteer for the army to avenge their brethren. (45-year-old Buryat female, Ulaanbaata, interview in Russian 09.09.2023.)

Likely influenced by these narratives propagated by Russian propaganda, some Siberian soldiers engage in retaliatory actions that bear the hallmarks of war crimes. The most notorious incident was depicted in a video shared online in which a Russian soldier (later identified as Ochur Suge Mongush) from an Akhmat battalion castrated a Ukrainian prisoner while he was still alive (Steporuk 2022).

Official Russian media deny any war crimes committed by Russian soldiers. Instead, there is a friendly exoticisation of Siberian minorities, portraying the war as an opportunity to showcase their ethnic culture, demonstrate unique values and highlight national peculiarities in character. Thus, Ria Novosti reported that Tuvan communication specialists secure military communication because Ukrainians cannot understand their language (Krâžev 2022). Video reports showing Tuvans exchanging orders and information via radio at command points are also frequently presented by Russian war correspondents. The new narrative about "Indigenous code talkers" turns the linguistic distinctiveness of the Tuvans into an important asset, giving the Russian army an advantage. Most information focuses on lamas and shamans who, under the leadership of Russia's Supreme Shaman, Tuvan Kara-oola Dopchun-oola,

perform rituals supporting the army behind the lines and directly on the front. Many reports have also been created about volunteers from the republics delivering yurts and other military equipment to the front.

In Russian media, stories about shamans and Buddhist monks ritually supporting Siberian soldiers are often featured, likely aimed at portraying the Russian army's tolerance towards cultural diversity within the Russian Federation. Below, as an ethnographic curiosity, is a description of how shamans protect soldiers from Ukrainian shelling:

> We sent three yurts to Rostov. It is a humanitarian mission. It is like a nomadic home, a home for Hun warriors. Shamans will perform humanitarian ceremonies there, protecting anyone who asks for them. The closer to the front lines, the faster soldiers can get there, and the rituals have more power. We wanted to bring these three yurts to Donbas, but people feared that shamans would come there. What are these yurts for? When the ceremony takes place, Hun warriors come there. For example, HIMARS, we call them "Chimeras". If a Chimera is approaching, Hun warriors who have been sleeping wake up. They need a place, yurts, and they see their home and all kinds of accessories, and they help our soldiers. (Aniseeva 2022)

Shamans are also supposed to "restore souls to the bodies" of wounded or mentally traumatised Russian soldiers. Cultural differences, ethnographic peculiarities and shamanic practices in the wartime reality serve as an example of Russia's multicultural society, where there will also be a place for Ukrainians from the so-called new territories. At the same time, the tolerated boundaries of ethnocultural distinctiveness are highlighted – diversity is tolerated in the ethnographic dimension, but not in the political one.

SIBERIAN SELF-ORIENTALISATION

Eccentric activists from the Buryat Hunnic Foundation also attempted to subversively utilise the discourse promoted by the Ukrainian side about the "Asian horde". With the onset of the war, they began to argue that Russia was indeed the heir to the Mongol hordes and, from a broader perspective, the empire of the Huns, whose leader, Attila, brought Western civilisation to its knees. Putin is supposed to be the new Scourge of God who will defeat the West, and Buryat, Kalmyk and Tuvan soldiers fight in accordance with the code of Chinggis Khan, being ruthless to the enemy but caring for the civilian population. The chairman of the Hunnic Foundation, Oleg Bulutov, regularly appears in Russian media, orientalising himself as a prophetic shaman who learns the future from Hunnic ancestors:

> The Special Military Operation will end next spring. But it will be preceded by a decisive battle on the Dnipro River, taking place where the ancestor of Attila, Balamber, began a war with the Goths to intervene on behalf of the Slavs. [...] There was a Hunnic leader who lived in the fourth century AD, and the battle itself took place on the Erac River, which is the lower Dnipro, where everything is happening now. Even the locations match, can you imagine? It is noteworthy that the Huns came through Crimea, and the Gothic state encompassed virtually all modern European countries. And these parallels are not unique. What if we roll back not 13 but eight centuries (because history always repeats itself every eight hundred years, the head of the foundation is convinced) and remember how Batu, the grandson of Chinggis Khan, defeated the German-Polish army? Or what happened during the reign of his great-great-grandson Khan Mengu-Timur, who founded Azak (today's Azov), Soldaia (Sudak) and even, according to one theory, Moscow? [...] By the way, during the reign of Mengu-Timur, there was not a single instance of him acting against the Russians. On the contrary, Russian detachments joined him on campaigns. It is not by chance that there are so many Buryats among the fighters on the front lines now. It's not because they went there for money or anything else. They simply have a mission! (Bobylkina 2023)

Such rhetoric can be juxtaposed with a series of eccentric statements by Russian soldiers, propagandist journalists and politicians and is sometimes interpreted by local political observers as the "intentional bringing of discourse to absurdity when one is forced to support what we are doing in Ukraine publicly but does not want to take responsibility for it" (41-year-old Russian male Ulan-Ude, online interview in Russian, 16.03.2023).

However, these eccentric statements align with the promoted idea of Russia's unique Eurasian character and a development path distinct from Europe (Waldstein and Turoma 2016, 11-20). In Buryatia, some pro-war activists promoted the idea that Russia is a descendant of the Golden Horde and, therefore, has the right to occupy lands once conquered by Batu Khan. In this way, they legitimised the military annexation of Ukrainian territories. On the site of a reconstructed Hunnic settlement on the outskirts of Ulan-Ude in 2023, shamanic rituals were performed to provide Buryat soldiers with protection and support from the spirits of Chinggis Khan and Attila – great conquerors of Europe (Namsaraeva 2024, 134-135).

Unprofessional and subversive vernacular forms of interpreting history and international relations constitute a part of the ideology legitimising the current political system in Russia, which distances itself from liberal democratic Europe, along with its imperial resentment and nostalgia (Namsaraeva 2024; cf. Balzer 2021). Otherwise, they would not be tolerated in public discourse. Russia's Eurasian *Sonderweg* simultaneously creates a space for the political and historical integration of Asian minorities (Tatars, Bashkirs, Buryats, Tuvans) whose intellectual elites, in the realm of historical

policy, somewhat identify with post-Mongol forms of statehood; the Tartar-Mongol conquests and the state structures they established laid the foundations for Eurasia as a specific political and civilisational space (Wiederkehr 2007, 43-57; c.f. Graber 2020, 37).

Since the 1990s, parallel to the mainstream Russian historiography, native, vernacular historiographies have developed in which authors attempt to give a new meaning to the history of the Russian state to overcome the subordinate status of colonised minorities and make them equal, active subjects of the state-building process. Thus, Tatar authors Gali Enikeev and Shichab Kitabchy, in their monograph titled *Legacy of the Tatars*, deconstruct and "demythologise" history, arguing that until the time of Peter the Great, Russia was, in fact, a Russo-Tatar horde (heir to the Golden Horde – *Altyn Orda*), which, due to forced Westernisation, was colonised by German officials and the ruling class, resulting in the population being transformed into an enslaved people through the institution of serfdom[6]. Building on the works of Nikolai Trubetskoy and Lev Gumilev, Tatar intellectuals criticise Western European cultural hegemony and call for building a society based on native Eurasian solidarity (Enikeev and Kitabčy 2013, 175-217). While some Tatar elites prefer to trace their nation-state traditions back to Volga, Bulgaria – a state annihilated by Mongol invasions – attempts to integrate their ethnic history into the history of the Russian state seem ubiquitous.

Therefore, it must be stated that opposition representatives of national minorities in exile promote the history of their nations as a history of colonial oppression. At the same time, loyalists, creatively leveraging the concepts of Russian Eurasianists, attempt to use another Russian anti-European shift to propagate their own Eurasian ideas, within which the peoples of Siberia and the Volga along with Russians, have been building an idiosyncratic civilisation for centuries. The Horde is subversively transformed from a symbol of barbarism to that of a unique development path and a way to empower national minorities.

The Eurasian historical discourse promoting institutional continuity between the Chinggis Khan Empire and contemporary Russia is prevalent among the Turkic-Mongolian intelligentsia. However, the mainstream of this discourse is produced by amateurs and activists rather than professional historians. In cooperation with Slavic ideologues of Eurasianism, this community develops alternative historical, geopolitical and civilisational frameworks for Russia. Given the radical antagonism

6 The persistence of references to the Golden Horde is evident in the case of the Bashkir activist Fail Alsynov, who was sentenced to four years on 17 January for "inciting ethnic hatred". Alsynov, known for organising ecological protests in Bashkortostan, was convicted for publicly using the expression "kara halyk" (literally, black people), referring to the dependent population of the Golden Horde. The court intentionally misinterpreted it as racist hate speech. The four-year sentence for the activist sparked mass protests in the republic.

with the West, these previously marginal voices are increasingly incorporated by symbolic elites (cf. Dijk 1993, 46) into public discourse and have begun to constitute an essential element of Russia's political imagination, shaping public opinion. In this case, orientalised ethnicity is strategically utilised to suppress larger national and political frameworks (Graber 2020, 211-212).

Self-orientalisation in the image of the untamed descendants of the Huns and Chinggisids (descendants of Chinggis Khan) is accompanied by the subversive use of the orientalised representation of Russia as the Golden Horde. By antagonising "corrupt Europe" and the "eternal Eurasian Empire", which has subjugated the West in the hypostases of Attila, Chinggis Khan and Putin, loyal representatives of Siberian ethnic groups, try to reframe the history and geopolitical position of Russia and themselves. They aim to overcome their marginality and occupy a central position in the post-war imagined Russian community. The experience of many Siberian ethnic minorities is situated within a broader context of political marginality and cultural autonomy. Being on the periphery presents both challenges and opportunities in terms of political and cultural expression. For the Buryats within Russia, their marginal status not only marks them as outsiders within the broader national context but also provides a unique platform from which to articulate their distinct identity and challenge central authorities (Graber 2020, 211). This encapsulates how peripheral communities leverage their position to challenge and redefine the narratives imposed upon them by central powers. In the redefined Eurasian narrative, Siberian ethnic groups become the historical and cultural core, and their territories are the hinterland where the Eurasian civilisation was born.

CONCLUSIONS

At the very beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Russian Federation extensively utilised soldiers from ethnic and national minorities originating from the impoverished peripheries of the empire. For economically marginalised minorities, becoming a "volunteer" in the war is often seen as the only way out of debt traps, a form, according to Alexander Etkind (2011) of "internal colonisation", wherein cultural domination of the centre is accompanied by exploitation of the poor peripheries. Essentially, the exploitation is neither ethnically nor racially profiled but is enforced through both market practices and authoritarian measures. The poorest social strata, as well as individuals with an unmanageable debt load, are offered military service for money beyond their reach along with the suspension of debt executions. A similar mechanism for recruiting a cheap "labour force" is applied to immigrant workers and impoverished residents of neighbouring post-Soviet countries. Market recruitment instruments are reinforced by oppressive practices, forcing subalterns, such

as prisoners, immigrants from Central Asia who have acquired Russian citizenship and Ukrainians from occupied territories, into service. This necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) is primarily executed through economic calculation, sending individuals who can be enrolled as cost-effectively as possible into military service and the war. National minorities are not part of this group coincidentally, it is the result of prolonged economic and political marginalisation of the periphery at the expense of the centre in Moscow.

In recent years, the militarisation of society in the republics has intensified through the establishment of military-educational institutions. Military cadet schools with boarding facilities have been established in the republics, and children attending regular schools are encouraged to join the ranks of the *Yunarmiya* (young army). This paramilitary youth organisation prepares children and teenagers for military service. In ethnic regions, new military units have been created, becoming significant and attractive places of employment. Therefore, we are dealing with a deliberate, institutionalised policy of militarising ethnic peripheries, a phenomenon of "ethnic soldiering": ethnic groups from the periphery are disproportionately incorporated by the metropolis into the army, resulting in ethnic soldiers becoming an essential tool for state territorial expansion (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992, 22-25).

It involves intersectionality, where ethnicity intersects with poverty and racial differences. This intersectionality, until recently, allowed for the discrimination of non-European citizens of Russia. In regions like Tuva, Buryatia and Transbaikalia – some of the poorest in Russia — contract military service has for decades been an effective channel for social mobility. The aggression against Ukraine temporarily elevated the social status of Siberian ethnic groups as communities that experienced significant wartime losses. Conversely, the high number of casualties poses a threat of depopulation for entire generations, casting doubt on the continued viability of the collaborative nationalist model, where national elites receive cultural autonomy, support and career opportunities inside the structures of the Russian state in exchange for loyalty (Szmyt 2023, 62-70). A new postcolonial vocabulary and decolonial ideology is now applied by Siberian activists in exile, who call for the decolonisation of Russia and the establishment of independent ethnonational states.

In Ukrainian society, soldiers representing Siberian nations serve as the radical Other, facilitating the process of differentiation between Russians and Ukrainians. Referring to Fredrik Barth's concept (1969), we can assert that Russified Siberian minorities have become instruments for the social organisation of cultural and national differences. Racial profiling applied to the Buryats, Tuvans and Sakha-Yakuts is extended to all Russian citizens. This "brand extension" reconstructs existing postcolonial and post-dependency Russo-Ukrainian relations.

Ukraine, historically treated by the imperial centre as the "border" of the Russian world, is now challenging the Russian discourse that invented a historyless,

artificial, rural and provincial Ukrainian identity. Faced with genocide and Russian military aggression, Ukrainians counter with a discourse about Moscow as the descendant of the Golden Horde. Strategic essentialisation refers to the deliberate use of an essentialist framework by marginalised or colonised groups to foster a sense of collective identity or to achieve political goals (cf. Spivak 1996). However, in this case, it is more apt to speak of the "strategic orientalisation" of an aggressive Other, a purposeful act of resistance against the imperial epistemic order imposed by Russia that deprives Ukrainians of agency, identity and sovereignty. Strategic orientalisation of the adversary is an attempt at emancipation from Russian cultural hegemony, involving the provincialisation of Russia and its culture, even in historical terms. The decolonial framework, which has held a dominant position in the Ukrainian view of Russia and Ukrainian-Russian relations since the beginning of the war, is specific in that the Ukrainian concept of decolonisation involves freeing itself from geopolitical and economic dependence on Russia as well as from the hegemony of the "great Russian culture". Unlike most decolonisation movements worldwide, Ukrainian decolonisation does not distance itself from Europe but rather attempts to "return" to it – to become a regular nation-state in East/Central Europe, like Romania, Poland or Czechia. Differentiation from Russia – essential for stabilising national borders – is achieved through the use of binary oppositions (Asia-Europe, despotism-democracy).

In Ukrainian public history, there is a process of "reclaiming the history of the Ancient Rus" (a synonym for Ukraine-Rus' and the Kyivan state)[7], a history appropriated by Moscovia during the time of Peter the Great. Soldiers from Siberian nations are used as tangible evidence of Russia's civilisational, racial, cultural and political otherness. Consequently, they become the subject of heightened, sometimes obsessive attention in Ukrainian media and social networks. Simultaneously, while dreaming of the ultimate disintegration of imperial Russia, these same media entities support the pro-independence, decolonial aspirations of political activists from Siberian minorities.

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7 This happens despite many Ukrainian professional medievalists rejecting this term as coined by Karamzin for the purpose of legitimising the transfer of central power from Kiev to Moscow.

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CONVERSATION

CHUKOTKA AND THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

KERGHITAGEEN[1]

It seems that Russia's invasion of Ukraine came as a surprise to the Indigenous people of Chukotka. Indeed, at first, there was confusion among them, then ignorance and even denial of the war. Militarist state propaganda and exceptional cash payments to soldiers and their families, on the one hand, and the threat of imprisonment to protesters, on the other hand, convinced most Chukotkans to accept the war and even find excuses for it. Dozens of residents from every village in Chukotka signed up as "volunteers", leaving their homeland to kill or be killed. Those who stayed at home have adapted to the new reality and returned to their routines, at least outwardly. In my research, I trace the Chukotkans perceptions of a seemingly distant war. The Russian authorities have criminalised any sign of anti-war speech and given that I have no right to endanger the Chukotkans, I cannot conduct interviews and surveys. What I can do is monitor internet sources. Thanks to the growing role of social networks in the daily life of Chukotka settlements, I was able to observe what people discussed and how in order to get a sense of what they were really thinking. As a litmus test to monitor trends in people's views on the war, I tracked donations to the front lines and the campaigns to attract them. Online research significantly limits my ability to describe a comprehensive picture, but it does provide enough circumstantial information to outline the social trends in Chukotka's communities. A very preliminary conclusion from my observations is that the most valuable group of men were taken from the villages. This group is the backbone of local settlements, providing traditional food, new generations and identity. The remaining Chukotkans are stubbornly trying to return to everyday life, and the war is not something they care about. The result is that the Russian authorities have dealt yet another crushing blow to the identity of Chukotka's Indigenous peoples.

KEYWORDS: Chukotka, Ukraine, Russia, SMO, war, social media.

1 The author of this opinion piece decided to remain anonymous and uses a pseudonym. This opinion piece did not undergo an external review process.

INTRODUCTION

The distinctive geographical features of Chukotka have formed its unique sociocultural characteristics. It is a sparsely populated area where Indigenous peoples make up almost half the population, and traditional subsistence still dominates the Indigenous settlements. Although the region is remote from the densely populated central regions of Russia, it has a significant mining industry based on a rotational labour force. During Soviet times, Ukrainians were the second largest immigrant group in the region after the Russians (Kumo and Litvinenko 2019, 60) and are still present today. There are quite a few mixed Russian-Chukchi and Ukrainian-Chukchi families in Chukotka, among other ethnicities, and the number of Chukchi living in the central regions of Russia and Ukraine has been increasing for decades. Together, these processes have built a rather mixed demographic picture in which the Chukchi, although they retain their characteristics, have been forced to adapt to other cultures.

How the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the people of Chukotka, including the Indigenous population, is the question considered here. The Russian authorities project contradictory and confusing justifications for the so-called special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine. The undoubted result of this propaganda are terms such as "Ukrofashists" and "neo-Nazis of the Kyiv regime" having taken root in Russian society. Despite the endless stream of militant clichés, the attitude of the Chukotka residents towards Russia's war in Ukraine differs from that portrayed by the pro-government media. At the very least, there are signs that not all residents in Chukotka approve of the actions of the Russian authorities in Ukraine. Even among those forced to support the operation, there is an opinion that war is not the solution. In order to investigate these views, I was forced to use mainly observational methods through online sources and communication tools. I remained anonymous in my online research so as not to harm the residents of Chukotka; anyone who takes part in non-government-sanctioned research is at risk. I also did not want to create ethical dilemmas for people who have no choice in a society that does not accept a diversity of opinion. Taken together, these difficulties significantly slowed down and complicated my research.

In the past 15 years, social networks based on online messaging have become popular in the settlements of Chukotka on account of slow internet but affordable smartphones. First WhatsApp and then Telegram contributed to the creation of a special communication environment. Social messengers have opened new horizons of communication for villagers. Previously, any information about upcoming and past events and incidents spread slowly, allowing for several interpretations. Now, every member of a social media group, which is almost every village resident or household, can be a spokesperson or newsmaker. Hunters easily gather together whenever a hunt is

necessary or invite villagers to the shore after a successful hunt to collect their share of the walruses or whales they have caught. Every villager has immediate access to the entire population of the village to place an advertisement for the sale of harvested fish, berries and wildlife. Even the local authorities use social media to inform villagers about formal events or hazardous natural phenomena. I am inclined to believe that social media more or less reflects the sociocultural appearance of the modern Chukotka settlement. Telegram channels have become a fairly popular means for regional authorities to inform the population, ahead of WhatsApp and other social media, such as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and, even more so, Facebook or Instagram, now banned by the federal authorities in Russia. I subscribed to the two most popular Chukotka Telegram channels dedicated to the war in Ukraine, "Chukotka to the Frontline" (Chukotka to the Frontline n.d.) and "People's Front: Chukotka" (People's Front: Chukotka n.d.). Several local Telegram channels in the Russian regions bordering Ukraine, such as Belgorod (Belgorod-Molniya n.d.) and Bryanskiy Vestnik (Bryansk Bulletin n.d.) were additional sources of information on the impact of the war on Russians.

Tracking two indicators – donations and their justification – I put together the puzzling perception of the war among Chukotka residents. I extracted information about the size and frequency of donations from Chukotka residents in support of the "Chukotka to the Frontline" movement as well as what the collected funds are spent on from the daily flow of messages and discussions. This data were then entered into a chart to visualise the dynamics. Although patriotism dominates the movement's Telegram channel, the dissenting thoughts of some of its members occasionally break through. I therefore set out to determine the frequency and number of dissenting statements; however, channel administrators more often than not beat me to the punch by deleting opposing statements. The majority of the group, including administrators, are supporters of the war, and their actions are formulaic: opponents are blocked, grieving parents and wives are calmed down, and those who in desperation ask questions deemed too uncomfortable are warned that they risk being subject to criminal prosecution. In general, no matter how hard I tried to adhere to quantitative methods, qualitative interpretation regained its place in this study. To complement the picture, I also observed information about current events in regional media, such as the regional newspaper Krainii Sever (Krainii Sever n.d.), the Telegram channel "ProChukotku/News" (Pro Chukotku/News. n.d.) and Radio Purga (Purga Radio n.d.). The Telegram channels of the regional governor, first Roman Kopin (Kopin n.d.) and then Vladislav Kuznetsov (Kuznetsov n.d.), and the State Duma deputy from Chukotka, Elena Evtyukhova (Evtyukhova n.d.), completed the general agenda dictated by the authorities.

After two years of war, the attitude of Chukotka residents towards the SMO in Ukraine has changed significantly. Not a trace remains of the initial rejection and ignorance. It is not easy to find out what the population of Chukotka really thinks about the war in Ukraine, but volunteer participation in the war among men and mass support of the front line by women are rather common in the region. These two groups of Chukotka residents are the focus of my research.

Military

The first several months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine were carried out by soldiers serving under contract. Service under contract was a good opportunity before the war for villagers to secure a prosperous life. By concluding a military contract, young Chukotka residents secured a full-time job, qualified training, early retirement and other social benefits. This is in addition to the potential employment opportunities after military service in law enforcement, which have expanded significantly in post-Soviet Russia. The first three residents of Chukotka killed in the war in Ukraine (Prochukotku.ru 2022b; Prochukotku.ru 2022c) were declared war heroes, but their deaths frightened the residents. In the spring and summer of 2022, there was almost no mention of the war on social media. Watching villages' social media, I got the feeling that people were ignoring the war, hoping it would pass them by.

By the end of the summer, Russian authorities announced the mobilisation of Russians, including the inhabitants of Chukotka. According to Volkov (2022), Russians were shocked by the compulsory "partial" mobilisation. The war, which seemed so far away and being waged by professional soldiers, suddenly came knocking – perhaps not at every door, but everyone heard the knocks. Unlike soldiers serving under contract, those who were mobilised were not ready and not motivated to serve or fight. They had their ordinary lives, which were suddenly interrupted by mandatory participation in a war. This was the first year of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the authorities had not yet drilled into people's heads the analogy with the Second World War when the homeland was in danger. In any case, mobilisation occurs in accordance with the law, meaning that its violation entails a sense of guilt among people and criminal prosecution by the authorities.

The authorities fulfilled the mobilization plan and provided for the short-term needs of the Russian army in personnel for the winter of 2022 and 2023. However, because the mobilisation caused a negative reaction in Russian society, the authorities looked for other strategies for recruiting the military. First, a propaganda campaign was launched to attract additional soldiers for the "holy" war against the "Ukronazis". Chukotka's social and mass media proudly called the Russian

soldiers who bought into the propaganda tricks "volunteers". The term appeared in contrast to "mobilised" and denoted the free choice of a citizen in the decision to go to war. There was also a group of prisoners, residents of Chukotka, who went to war in exchange for amnesty. Wagner, the notorious private military company, announced a recruitment drive for prison inmates, guaranteeing their release after six months of combat (Fokht et al. 2023). I learned about these Chukotka prisoners from messages in the Chukotka Telegram channels, which regularly publish information about fellow countrymen killed in Ukraine. In the villages' social media, villagers know each other personally. The villagers, knowing well the nature of their criminal neighbours, laughed at the statements of the pro-government media about the selfless, heroic prisoners. On the contrary, I also found a handwritten letter published in a telegram channel from a young criminal who, being a volunteer, sent an apology to his fellow villagers for his criminal activities. It is impossible to know how sincere his apology was, but it was obvious that the war mixed people, made them the same, regardless of whether they were criminals or law-abiding citizens – they all agreed to kill and be rewarded for it.

The Chukotka authorities did not publicly announce how many Chukotka residents went to fight in Ukraine as part of the mobilisation and how many went there voluntarily. In the fall of 2022, there was speculation that several people were mobilised from each village, with as many as 10 from some. Since the spring of 2023, the number of volunteers has increased sharply, and again, there were rumours of a similar number of 10 volunteers, but from almost every village (see Figure 1). This is a large amount given the small population of Chukotka, which numbered 47,480 people as of 1 January 2023 (Chukotka.rf n.d.). Unable to verify the precise number of men taken from the villages by the war, I made approximate calculations. According to the Chukotka mass media, the total number of Chukotkans killed from February 2022 to January 2024 was 60 individuals, including 37 Indigenous residents; these numbers were extrapolated using calculations I found in independent internet research. Olga Ivshina (2023) catalogued reports published by local authorities throughout Russia about soldiers killed in the war. Although the figure of 33,236 killed is clearly lower than the actual losses, they are confirmed. Putin stated that there are 617,000 Russian soldiers in Ukraine (Aksienov 2023). As a rough estimate, this means that the percentage of soldiers whose deaths were announced in the media is about 5.4%. When we take into account the official number of 60 killed Chukotka residents (January 2024), this means approximately 1,100 Chukotkan residents, including roughly seven hundred Indigenous people, went to fight in Ukraine. The figure is likely higher, but as of yet, there are no other data. The above calculations to some extent concur with rumours circulating on social networks in Chukotka. The high percentage of young Indigenous villagers participating

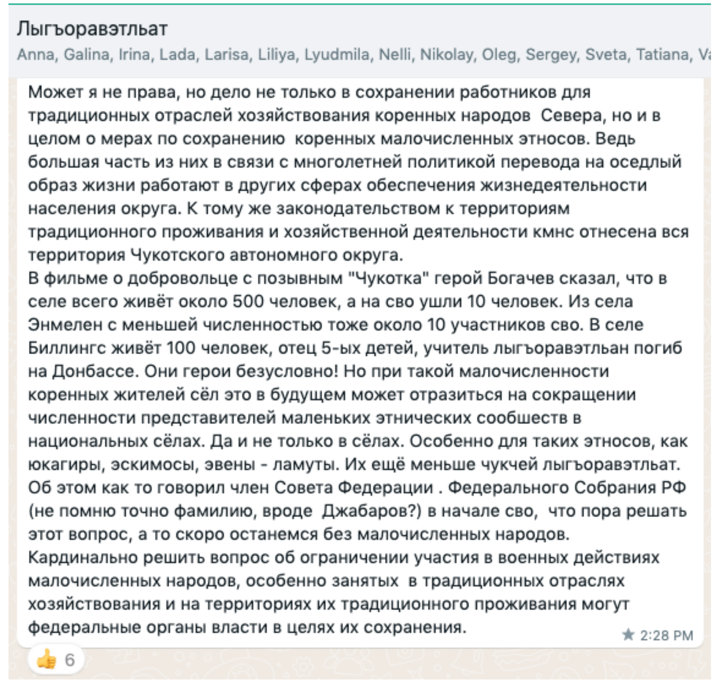


Figure 1. Online discussion about the impact of the special military operation on the future of the Indigenous peoples of Chukotka.

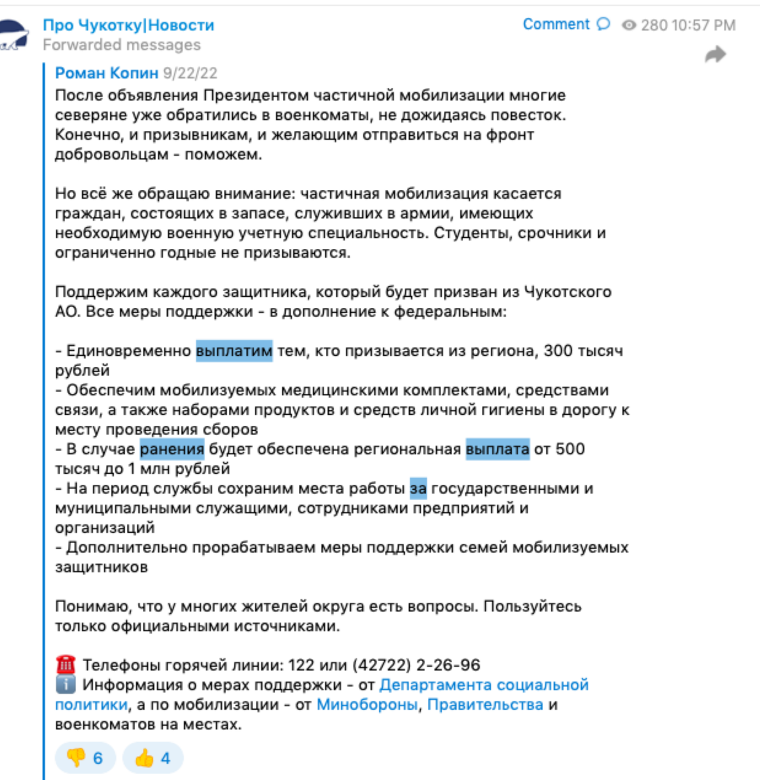
Translation: Maybe I'm wrong, but the matter is not only about preserving workers for the traditional economic sectors of the Indigenous peoples of the North. […]
In a documentary about a volunteer contract military man, Bogachiov, the main character, said that there were about 500 people in his village, and 10 people went to the SMO. About 10 Indigenous residents from the village of Enmelen – the population there is smaller – also went to the SMO. The population in the village of Billings is only 100 residents; their teacher, Lygyoravetlan, the father of 5 children, died in the Donbas. They are definitely heroes! But given the small number of Indigenous people in the villages, such a number of war dead may reduce the number of small Indigenous communities in the future. […]*(Lygooravetliat, 2024)*

in the Russian invasion of Ukraine worries the Chukchi elders. Despite the real danger of criminal prosecution "for fakes about the Russian army" {Russian legislation justification to stop criticism of the government's decision to invade Ukraine}, they are sometimes willing to discuss this issue on social media, but without much result.

Why Did the Chukotkans Go to War?

The first combatants to invade Ukraine were soldiers already serving signed contracts, which meant they had to carry out their orders. The second wave of Chukotka's war participants were mobilised; that is, they had a choice between going to war or going to prison for breaking the law. For almost a year now, volunteers have also been going to war, having made their choice voluntarily, for personal reasons. The mass media point to the patriotic motivation of defending the homeland from Ukrainian "fascists", which is then echoed on social media and repeated by contract soldiers who participate in discussions on such topics on social media. One volunteer, for example, stated that he was indifferent to the SMO in Ukraine until he learned from Russian television that German Leopard tanks had arrived in the newly formed "Russian" regions, writing, "I have to go to defend my homeland from the Nazi invasion, just like our grandfathers did." From discussions on social media, I learned that someone went to war to avenge a brother, a son, father or friend killed in the first two waves of army reinforcements for the war. Widespread hatred of the West and revenge for the collapsed USSR also circulate within the list of motivations. In the villages of Chukotka, male solidarity matters too. Members of one fraternal group, such as a hunting or reindeer herding team, signed a contract because their informal leaders did so. This solidarity can turn negative when alcohol is involved, with some men signing contracts while drunk. When they sober up, they learn they have signed a military contract joining the Russian Armed Forces and there is nothing they can do about it.

Only the government in its recruitment campaign indicates the true reason why volunteers go to war – money. The Russian government and, separately, regional authorities offer a fairly large set of social benefits to military personnel serving under contract (Prochukotku.ru 2022e; Prochukotku.ru 2022f). According to the mass media, a soldier who participates in the SMO has a salary of about 200,000 roubles ($2,300) a month; there is also emphasis on compensation for the family of 5,000,000 roubles ($55,000) in the event the soldier is killed. The Chukotka authorities also publish information about the compensation the regional government provides to the soldiers and their families in addition to federal funding (Fig. 2). The most notable figures in these advertisements were first 300,000 and then 400,000 roubles ($3,500–$4,500) as a one-time bonus to a soldier upon signing a contract and from 500,000 to 1,000,000 roubles ($5,500–$10,000) in case a soldier is wounded. It is necessary to clarify that the declared salaries and compensation represent a huge sum for an ordinary family in Russia, including in Chukotka. Combatants returning from the war to their home village a few months later with a lot of money are the best advertisement for those who want to pay off debts, buy an apartment, a vehicle or something else. Poverty, loan debts, dreams of living as advertised, in a good house, owning a vehicle and travelling, overpower all fears and doubts.



Про Чукотку|Новости
Forwarded messages
Comment 280 10:57 PM

Роман Копин 9/22/22

После объявления Президентом частичной мобилизации многие северяне уже обратились в военкоматы, не дожидаясь повесток. Конечно, и призывникам, и желающим отправиться на фронт добровольцам - поможем.

Но всё же обращаю внимание: частичная мобилизация касается граждан, состоящих в запасе, служивших в армии, имеющих необходимую военную учетную специальность. Студенты, срочники и ограниченно годные не призываются.

Поддержим каждого защитника, который будет призван из Чукотского АО. Все меры поддержки - в дополнение к федеральным:

- Единовременно выплатим тем, кто призывается из региона, 300 тысяч рублей
- Обеспечим мобилизуемых медицинскими комплектами, средствами связи, а также наборами продуктов и средств личной гигиены в дорогу к месту проведения сборов
- В случае ранения будет обеспечена региональная выплата от 500 тысяч до 1 млн рублей
- На период службы сохраним места работы за государственными и муниципальными служащими, сотрудниками предприятий и организаций
- Дополнительно прорабатываем меры поддержки семей мобилизуемых защитников

Понимаю, что у многих жителей округа есть вопросы. Пользуйтесь только официальными источниками.

☎️ Телефоны горячей линии: 122 или (42722) 2-26-96
ℹ️ Информация о мерах поддержки - от Департамента социальной политики, а по мобилизации - от Минобороны, Правительства и военкоматов на местах.

👎 6 👍 4

Figure 2 Regional financial support for mobilised residents of Chukotka, in addition to federal. September 2022, Prochukotku.ru.

Money is a strong justification, especially when it is supplemented by patriotic propaganda. According to the media, almost everyone killed from Chukotka was a hero. The obituaries usually state that a volunteer was killed while covering the retreat of their comrades or evacuating wounded brothers in arms. Death, injury, and broken families are drowned out by money and media glorification, and ultimately strengthen the regime. For now. In any case, there are enough volunteers in Chukotka, and apparently in Russia, that the authorities do not consider it necessary to launch another mobilisation. Which raises another question: Will a growing number of dead and disabled Russian citizens, including the inhabitants of Chukotka, make people understand that neither they nor the country needs the war?

Civilians: Everything to the Front Line, Everything for Victory?

During the two years of Russia's war in Ukraine, the attitude of the Chukotka people towards the SMO has changed radically. In the first spring and summer, the Chukotkans seemed to ignore the war on most social media, discussing everyday things as if nothing else had happened. People followed the news of the ongoing war with dismay, with the occasional patriotic comment about the war either causing a backlash or a pause in conversation. Eventually, participants of Chukotka's social media became more involved in discussions about Russia's war in Ukraine. News of both drafted and contract soldiers, fellow countrymen, killed and wounded began to arrive in the villages. Authorities then pulled young villagers from the communities as part of the "partial" mobilisation (RIA Novosti 2022a). Once the Chukotkan social media began to convey that the majority of those called up for the war in the villages were marine hunters and reindeer herders, Russia's war in Ukraine ceased to feel distant and alien. The number of mobilised indigenous people was so large that even Roman Kopin, the governor of Chukotka at that time and a supporter of the war, was forced to promise that not a single sea hunter and reindeer herder would be mobilised again. The autumn mobilisation gave rise to various feelings among the Chukotka communities. There was still some discussion of the war, with reposts of local newspaper articles calling on the residents to provide all possible assistance. These publications did not prompt much discussion. The lack of reaction could signify a negative attitude towards the war. The poverty of the villagers, whose income is barely enough to survive on, is also a good reason to withhold support. However, some group members warned that discussing the war, especially anything related to the soldiers on the front lines is prohibited because "the enemy" might be monitoring social media sites.

In any case, trying to continue ignoring the war, as seemed to be the case throughout summer 2022, when only contract soldiers were being sent to Ukraine, was no longer an option. Now that their relatives and friends were at war, the villagers were forced, if not to support the war, then certainly to worry about the life and health of the soldiers. This also means that a killed or wounded relative should be seen as a hero rather than an invader. Chukotkan social media had no choice but to justify the participation of the Chukotka residents in Russia's war in Ukraine. Patriotic conversations and the glorification of the dead soldiers prevail over the rare mournful questions of the relatives of those killed, such as why the war is necessary and why fellow countrymen had to die. The money generously poured into society by the authorities drowned out the desperate cries of mothers and wives mourning their fallen men. Along with public praise for fallen heroes, monuments, praise boards and hero desks, the goal was to force women to be proud of their sons and husbands killed in combat.

There are those who believe that regardless of the reason for the war, Russia's soldiers should be supported. Many Chukotkans have willingly transferred money and sent clothes, shoes and medical kits to the front. Combined with the overwhelming poverty of the villagers, the propaganda that poisons Russian civil society has also made the war a tangible way of solving one's financial problems. The mothers and wives of soldiers have become leaders in their support. Knitting socks and mittens, weaving camouflage nets, both have become popular activities among grandmothers and mothers, a brand to unite people and make them happy that they can contribute to the SMO. These women raised money to buy food, clothes, shoes and special equipment first and then equipment that helps soldiers kill, such as drones, vision devices and so on. Donations for the Chukotka soldiers participating in the war are difficult to interpret unambiguously. At first glance, people want to somehow help relatives and friends who are at war. Whatever one may say, this is also a sign of approval of the current Russian ideological concept of a unique "Russian world" (Suslov 2018), a world built on the confrontation of cultures and the division of spheres of influence. This worldview is based on coercion and force and is contrary to the widespread use of the term "voluntariness".

USSR 2.0.: Reflection in Donations

Money was the decisive argument in convincing Chukotkan volunteers to go to war in Ukraine. And it appears it is enough to compensate families for the loss or wounding of their loved ones in the SMO. However, the Chukotka people not participating in this war also express their attitude towards it in cash. Donations to support the SMO have become commonplace in Chukotka. By the summer of 2022, it was revealed that Russian soldiers were often left alone to secure needs, such as tactical clothing, survival gear and medical kits. This issue intensified during the autumn mobilisation when even assault rifles were not provided to all the mobilised soldiers (Fokht et al. 2022).

There are three main sources of financial support for soldiers from Chukotka: the state budget, individual and group donations, and donations from commercial companies. Supplies for the Chukotka forces are financed through the regional government's budget (Fig. 2). A special regional foundation Chukotka to the Frontline (not to be confused with Alexander Pravednykh and Nadezhda Efimova's donation movement) focuses on donations from commercial companies. The most popular and significant in terms of the volume of cash collected from individuals is the abovementioned donation movement of the same name, "Chukotka to the Frontline", under the informal leadership of Alexander Pravednykh, which began its activities in the summer of 2022 (Prochukotku.ru 2022a). Pravednykh is what is called a real "Chukot", a man who cannot imagine life outside the region. He worked for many years in various positions

in the Anadyr district telephone service department, currently lives in Anadyr and runs a small business. Pravednykh was not a public figure and his political activity was limited to participation in the elections of members of the Anadyr District Council in 2008, he was not elected (Info.vybory.pro n.d.). The movement is an example of a popular initiative supported by the authorities, the media and the people. The spark that ignited Pravednykh to establish the movement came after he learned that the foundation to which he had donated money was spending the funds on employee salaries (Prochukotku.ru. 2022a). In response, he created a Telegram channel with several regional mass media figures joining him, headed by Nadezhda Efimova, the director of the Chukotka News Agency (CNA; Fig. 3). In addition to advertising in the media, CNA uses the same Telegram channel as Pravednykh to attract donations. Although they have different bank accounts, it seems that Pravednykh and Efimova managed to coordinate the donations of the Telegram channel members between themselves because there were no noticeable signs of tension or conflict over money on the channel. This movement primarily provided soldiers with tactical clothing and personal protection as well as practical equipment, such as saws, axes and more. Hospital equipment and medical kits were another major area of supply. They later expanded the aid with auxiliary equipment, such as generators and vehicles. In the second year of the war, the information Pravednykh shared in his reports to donors began to show subtle signs of weapons-related equipment shipments, such as electronic jammers, drones and thermal imaging sights.

Government and municipal officials have tried several times to exploit the popularity of the "Chukotka to the Frontline" movement. They joined the fund in delivering equipment to combat units, made statements about cooperation and promoted the idea that the fund would be successful thanks to them. This greatly offended the participants of the movement, and they repeatedly pointed out the injustice of such statements. The last big attempt to seize the initiative occurred in early autumn 2023. Kremlin's protégé and governor of Chukotka, Vladislav Kuznetsov, used any means at his disposal to promote his popularity in the region. This was when the government of Chukotka created the foundation with the same name, Chukotka to the Frontline.[2] More criticism followed from the movement's participants. Pravednykh pointed out several times the difference between the movement he controls and the fund managed by the governor's office. It was clear that he did not pretend to represent all of Chukotka, but he really did not want his movement under the control of the officials. Over time, however, the conflict was somehow resolved, with no more confusing announcements or tense messages on Pravednykh's Telegram channel.

2 It is common practice in Russia to use a similar name or title to replace an independent person or organization. For example, in the election process, the authorities sometimes promote a group of people with the same name as an opposition candidate in order to steal his votes.

Figure 3. Announcement of fundraising details in support of Chukotkans on the frontline (SMO). From the Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline".

The channel (Fig. 4) became the basis of communication between administrators and donors. The channel administrators have been exploring the best option to provide donors with satisfactory reporting information and as leverage to increase donations. In the beginning, the number and frequency of donations were small, so they mentioned each donation and the name of the donor. Later, Pravednykh decided to inform donors every couple of days, and sometimes, when he was busy personally delivering aid to frontline units, once a week. On the contrary, Efimova, head of CNA, continued to publish the daily total amount of donations and list the names of donors. Individuals and groups of individuals transferred money to Pravednykh's personal bank account, whereas companies and groups of employees from regional and municipal departments preferred to transfer money to the agency's.

In the initial period, while the "Chukotka to the Frontline" channel administration was looking for the best way to inform donors, things were a bit confusing.

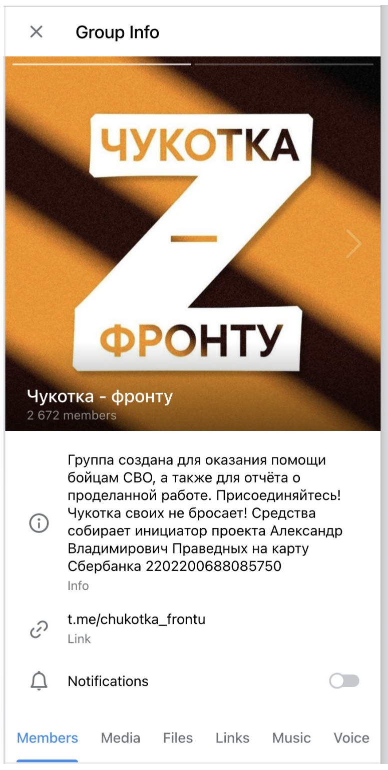


Figure. 4. Group info and avatar of the Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline".

Until October 2022, it was difficult to determine which account was used for donations. Therefore, I simply divided all donations equally between both accounts, except for those contributions where the note clearly indicated which account the donations went to. Figure 5 summarises the donations to Pravednykh's bank account, that of CNA and their combined amount. The amount of donations should be, if not exact, then at least somewhat close to the true numbers. According to the website mk.chukotka.ru, over four months in 2023, Pravednykh and CNA accumulated 11 million roubles (Kovalikhin 2023; MK-Chukotka.ru 2023), and the data in my chart corroborate these figures.

In the first few months, the amount of donations was small due to various circumstances. Firstly, the majority of Chukotka's population was still in a state of shock from the unprecedented war in Europe. In addition, the Russian authorities have in recent years described the Russian army as a well-paid, well-equipped, professional

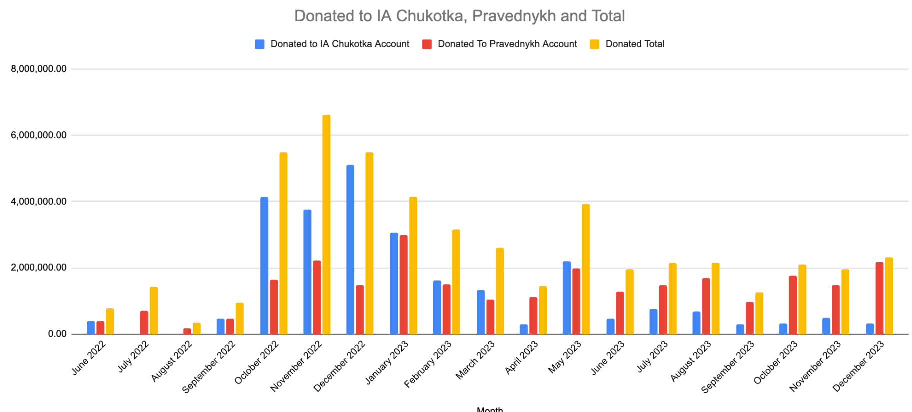


Figure. 5. Donations to the "Chukotka to the Frontline" movement bank accounts.

army capable of defeating any adversary in a local conflict. Finally, not many Chukotka people were involved in the invasion of Ukraine. At least during the first six months of the war, the Chukotka media mentioned killed soldiers from Chukotka only three times (Prochukotku.ru. 2022b; 2022c; 2022d). When the mobilisation began in the fall, it involved a huge number of Russians and a relatively large number of Chukotka residents in the SMO. This mobilisation raised questions about the ability of Russia to supply its army (Moscow Online 2022) as the mobilised soldiers experienced a shortage of military clothing and equipment. Since then, donations have increased, albeit in the winter of 2022 and 2023 it was mainly money from Chukotka companies (Fig. 5).

As of the beginning of summer 2023, donations have fallen and look approximately the same, about two million roubles per month. There are some possible reasons for the decline in donations. Several similar movements have emerged in the region, including small ones in the districts. The pro-Putin "People's Front: Chukotka" collects donations for the frontline. From time to time, advertisements from civilian volunteers or soldiers appear on social media to raise money to purchase transport, equipment and medicine for the soldiers. Scammers also collect donations (RIA Novosti 2022b; Sidorov 2022), presenting themselves as volunteer foundations that need donations to support the Russian army.

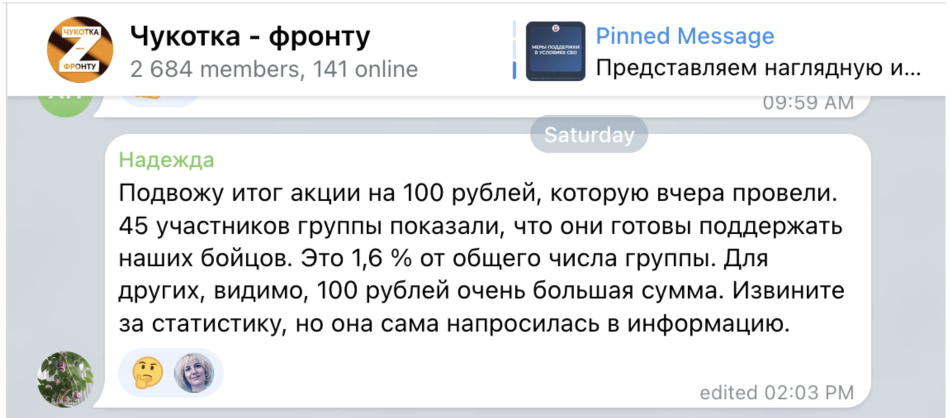


Figure. 6. Nadezhda Efimova's message summarises the call to donate 100 roubles to see how many Telegram channel subscribers will donate to the bank accounts of "Chukotka to the Frontline" (6 July 2024).

Do the Majority of Chukotka Residents Support the War through Donations?

The number of members (or rather subscribers) in the Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline", more than 2,600 individuals by the end of 2023, does not reflect the number of donors. Donations are made not only by subscribers but also by random visitors to the channel. At the same time, as Pravednykh and Efimova repeatedly noted in their disappointed messages, the real number of donors is actually small – only several dozen people compared to the 2,684 subscribers (July 2024) on the Telegram channel (Fig. 6).

The problem stemmed from the fact that the movement's enthusiastic supporters wanted it to be massive. To do this, movement activists signed up several dozen people at a time to the Telegram channel using the contacts their phones. While activists were pleased with the growing number of participants, new subscribers often learned they were members of the channel several weeks or even months later. They wrote in the channel chat that they had just accidentally found out the real goals of the movement and justified it by claiming they believed it was just one of many propaganda channels. It is likely that among the subscribers of the Telegram channel, there are many who want to keep abreast of events but do not want to donate money to the war for various reasons. They limited themselves to consuming a few patriotic videos, stories, slogans and poems posted on the news feed and, eventually, tired of it and simply stopped checking for updates.

To maintain the volume of donations, the administrators of the "Chukotka to the Frontline" channel host various events to attract Chukotka residents.

The Chukotka News Agency publishes an advertisement for the channel on its website prochukotku.ru. The Telegram channel, at the same time, publishes daily documentary films as well as upbeat stories and photographs of everyday military life on the front lines and in hospitals. Video and audio recordings of calls from Russian celebrities to unite and donate to the war are often posted. Patriotic and militant folk poetry and song performances occupy a significant place. The obituaries of fallen soldiers always cause waves of condolences and subsequent donations.

Channel administrators also diversify the donation methods to make them accessible and attractive. In December 2022, Efimova addressed the group members:

> Good morning, Chukotka! Today is the last Thursday of the outgoing year. There is very little time left until the New Year! Shall we continue our pre-holiday fireworks? So, let me remind you: 100 and 300 roubles – a firecracker; 500 and 1,000 roubles – fireworks; 3,000 roubles – a volley from the Tsar's Cannon. Pick up the baton! (Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline", 27 December 2022)

Of all this variety, the channel members fell in love with the term "volley", although its categorisation disappeared completely, with any amount of donation, in the end, called a "volley". Around the same time, Efimova proposed "cutting off the *khvostiki* [tails]" (Fig. 7), that is, a campaign to round bank totals to the nearest thousand roubles. For example, if the owner of a bank account has 23,152 roubles in his account, then 152 roubles can be transferred to the "Chukotka to the Frontline" movement, rounding down the amount in the account to 23,000 roubles.

> Nadezhda Efimova admin: +961.07 roubles is the *khvostik* from my debit card to our best guys! The whole country is praying for you! You are the best, the bravest, the worthiest in the world! All the warmth of our souls to our defenders!
> […]
> Anna Chukotka: Good idea! I'll also transfer the *khvostik* from my debit card now. Channel members, join us! Let's move the *khvostik* from the debit card today. If 2,156 people transfer at least 50 roubles each, there will already be 107,800. Our defenders are really looking forward to this help! (Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline", 15 December 2022)
> *Call to cut off the kvostiki. Telegram channel "Chukotka to the Frontline", 15 December 2022 – translated by the Author*

Since then, the most popular amount among channel members has become 333 roubles, although this was not the original idea. Rather often, channel members

encouraged each other to limit their festivities and instead donate money to the front line. Another suggestion was to give up a morning cup of coffee and send its cost as a donation. Administrators used any means (poetry, stories, videos and audio recordings), any reason (obituaries of soldiers, photos and videos of wounded soldiers and civilians, destroyed cities) and asked for any amount of money, desperate to raise enough money to cover the soldiers' requests for military equipment and clothing. However, the war is somewhere far away, and life goes on. The Chukotkans must survive in the here and now, dealing with everyday challenges. Children grow up and start new families. They have children who need to be raised and educated. Parents need to earn money for clothes, food, housing, treatments and so onThe daily expenses of maintaining a family, already limited, are strained by the war and its economic consequences. All these circumstances, of course, limit the size of donations. It is also quite possible that these everyday worries of Chukotkans about survival are intensified by their doubts about the need to kill Ukrainian soldiers in order to "return Russian" regions in Ukraine to Russia.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

More than two years have passed since the start of the Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine, a war that has shaken the fundamental legal and moral principles of modern society. The reaction of Chukotka residents to the war has changed over time and continues to fluctuate. The trend points can be simplified to rejection, acceptance, compartmentalisation and a return to routine life. Indeed, there are now signs that the residents of Chukotka are getting used to living under such conditions. Death and disability have become commonplace, and state-ordered murder is simply another source of making money. However, in the world media, the situation looks similar. In the spring of 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was almost the only topic in the news, whereas today, even the most horrific civilian massacres in Ukraine barely make the news cycle.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Russian authorities in the invasion of Ukraine was the blatant dismantling of Russian democracy. The authorities, juggling the terms "denazification" and "demilitarisation" of Ukraine as well as contradictory slogans, such as the reunification of Russian lands and the construction of a multipolar world, called for the consolidation of the country in the name of these goals. This unity, as they understood it, meant adherence to government policy, and any deviation was prohibited under threat of imprisonment. Thus, Russians, including the Chukotkans, are forced to hide their thoughts about the war in Ukraine. Researchers are having a hard time learning people's true opinions. By identifying and systematising the diverse picture of how Russians perceive the war,

they come to the conclusion that the general trend does not quite coincide with what the Russian government would like. According to the Public Sociology Laboratory (2024), the majority of Russians are dissatisfied with the war against Ukraine but do not oppose it. At the same time, even when justifying the war, they do not turn into its supporters.

The online monitoring in this research cannot reflect the accuracy of the full-fledged ethnographic study conducted by the Public Sociology Laboratory, but its results showed a similar pattern in Russians' attitudes towards the war in Ukraine. There are government officials who claim that dying for the motherland is an honour, but they themselves are not going to die for it. They obtain power and money in exchange for leading people into combat for the "Russian world". There are activists who believe in the goals of the SMO and make efforts to support it. There are those who benefit from participating in the war, either financially by sacrificing their life and health or by supplying instruments of death. Most still see war as something the government does, not something they need to care about. Those Chukotka residents who do not agree with the government policies, hiding their thoughts, try to avoid militant activities. Unfortunately, today, it is not enough to shy away from militant cries; everyone must publicly declare their devotion to the fight for the "Russian world" – people are forced to shout their support. However, the size of the donations shows that the war in Ukraine at least not their priority.

The most valuable stratum of the Indigenous villages was decimated, having drawn skilled men of reproductive age to war. This group is the backbone of the local settlements, providing food, identity and new generations of Chukotkans. Money, patriotism, masculine solidarity, fear and alcohol have mixed together and pulled the Chukotkan out of their communities in the hope of surviving in a rapidly and dramatically changing world. Some of them will die or become disabled in combat operations. Those who do survive will return to their settlements with post-traumatic stress. Significant changes in cultural identity, even compared to the effects of globalisation, are brewing in Chukotkan communities.

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REVIEW

CONFERENCE REPORT: FROM A POLYPHONY OF EXPERIENCES TO A COMMON ANTHROPOLOGY. POLAND-UKRAINE CONFERENCE AT THE OPEN-AIR FOLK ARCHITECTURE MUSEUM IN SANOK, 04–07.06.2024

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For several years now, there has been a growing debate in the social sciences about the many spheres of decolonisation – in social, cultural, political, economic or pedagogical processes, or as an element of how academics have addressed power professionally, that is, in how they approach their research. Critical research perspectives have in these debates sought to question, provoke, remove and bring into focus the historical inequities that undermined our collective capacities to achieve greater understanding and representation for those we do research with.

Even more pressingly, in Central and Eastern Europe, debates on decolonising research perspectives have become particularly pointed following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The present conference was thus organised to focus on

a specific real-world case, that of the historically-rooted relations between Poland and Ukraine. In particular, in the wake of more than a century of Polish social scientific research of Ukraine that charted Ukraine's journey through several empirical imaginations and regimes into full independence since 1991, we wished to interrogate the submerged themes of colonial, post-colonial and decolonial lenses that have in many instances shaped many Polish researchers' readings of Ukraine, even if unknowingly. One powerful series of responses has, for instance, emerged as Ukrainian scholars have begun to take Poland itself seriously as an area of research and study. Particularly since independence, Ukrainian scholars have been able to take opportunities to study Poland, and this developing field of research brings with it its own critiques and voices concerning Polish perspectives.

While Polish-Ukrainian relations have a part to play in broader global debates on post-colonial realities, the organisers of this conference nevertheless decided to gather participants who have mastered specific regional, cultural and linguistic knowledge at a more granular level in order to create a fertile environment for honest and robust exchanges of ideas and approaches. Most of the invited speakers were, therefore, Polish or Ukrainian anthropologists and ethnologists working in Polish or Ukrainian research institutions and with extensive ethnographic field experience in the region. The conference languages were Polish and Ukrainian, with simultaneous translation provided, although in practice this service was used by very few participants as most could understand both languages.

A central animating principle of this conference was that research situations bring to the fore the considerable baggage of mutual expectations, prejudices, stereotypes and views about the interlocutor. The organisers therefore began with a reading of ethnographic research as that form of scientific enquiry is based on direct contact with people, either in the form of long-term or repeated fieldwork, and it gives researchers access to insights that defy facile generalisations and resist quickly-produced, shallow reporting. Of course, the rigours of ethnographic best practice also throw a spotlight on ethical issues regarding the conduct of research, the storage of collected materials and intellectual property. Moreover, such research often involves a direct confrontation with the jagged and jarring research-scape of social memory, personal experience and attitudes toward broader political issues among interviewees, all of which can challenge researchers' previous experience and knowledge. In this particular situation, focused on Polish-Ukrainian relations, these discontinuities go beyond the more typical encounter with "otherness" commonly sought out in social anthropology. The conference thus aimed to initiate an open but non-confrontational dialogue between Polish and Ukrainian researchers to find ways of conducting more informed, open, dialogical, and methodologically and theoretically well-prepared anthropological research in the future.

The event began with two keynote lectures. Magdalena Zowczak (University of Warsaw) spoke about the "Eastern research" direction of ethnology at

the University of Warsaw over the last thirty years. She not only presented a history of research projects and their outcomes, but also reflected on how her own thinking about Ukraine and her position as a researcher from Poland changed as a result of encounters in the field and research in various Ukrainian regions. In his keynote, Andrii Portnov (Viadrina University Frankfurt/Oder) focused on what became one of the most important avenues of discussion and conclusions for the conference: the lack of understanding and empathy or, rather, discrepancies in the interpretation of specific issues, including identities, belonging and diversity in Ukraine, within communication between researchers from Eastern and Central Europe and German scholars, or even among the German public and political actors.

During a panel on the Colonial/Decolonial/Postcolonial, Anna Engelking presented an interpretation of Józef Obrębski's work, which some authors consider to be a precursor to postcolonial research. Oleksandr Vasianovych presented a paper prepared with Vasyl Balushok (who was unable to come to Sanok) on colonial stereotypes concerning nobility, showing complex discussions about the roots of communities considered by others to be nobility in Ukraine and identifying themselves as such. During the question-and-answer session especially, there was a lively discussion about the justification of using national names for groups and people who identify themselves in this way. The next presentation, by Irena Prawdzic-Jankowska, was one of the most controversial at the conference, as she compared the Volyhnia massacre of the Polish population to the Holocaust and did not reflect on the complex historical context of these events.

The next panel dealt with silences and hesitations in research: what to write about, where to stop, how to decide upon a research topic. Iwona Kaliszewska revealed her doubts about how to write about her own research experiences in two post-Soviet field sites. She presented her unpublished and perhaps even unpublishable autoethnography, in which she admitted to having opinions and feelings that researchers often silence to avoid controversy or out of respect for larger issues and questions, especially in times of war. Ignacy Jóźwiak presented his paper in Ukrainian, using the English word "westplaining" in his subtitle. He reflected on the hierarchies of knowledge, epistemic violence and epistemic imperialism in relation to "Western approaches", but also called for the Ukrainians' existential fight for their freedom to be seen as part of the global struggle against imperialism. In his contribution, Łukasz Smyrski focused on the Polish-Ukrainian context, offering a critical analysis of Polish "Eastern studies", drilling down on the term "East" itself as problematically vague.

The panel on history and memory had only two presentations for technical reasons – there were problems with the online connection to Ukraine at this stage. Anastasia Baukova described the fate of monuments of important figures in Polish history that were located in L'viv before the Second World War. Elżbieta Olzacka then spoke about the grassroots and state creation of museums and exhibitions during and about wars, including the present war on Ukraine. This was followed by

an interesting discussion on the appropriateness of some analytical terms, such as "heritage", for the analysis of such exhibitions as well as on emotions as part of the research process.

The last panel of the conference's first day included presentations by researchers who focus on issues only indirectly related to mutual Polish-Ukrainian research. Juraj Buzalka from Comenius University in Bratislava talked about the inadequacy of the Western leftist critique of imperialism with respect to post-socialist Europe. Referring to his experiences in Slovakia, he postulated that cosmopolitan post-socialist anthropology needs to liberate itself from the Western-centric critique inspired by liberal-individualist and radical leftist approaches. Katarzyna Waszczyńska from the University of Warsaw and Stepan Zacharkevich, a Belarusian researchers based presently at the European Humanitarian University in Vilnius, talked in dialogue about the past and future of ethnological research in and on Belarus.

The next day began with a panel on historical and anthropological research on "Rusyns", an ethnic group often categorised and perceived differently depending on a researcher's national affiliation. The presentations by Pavlo Len'o, Natalia Korol and Bartłomiej Chromik showed the diversity of approaches and opinions. Pavel Len'o, who attended online from his workplace at the Uzhhorod University, offered a critical perspective on the process of renaming places in the Zakarpattia region. He emphasised that each change of state regimes governing the lands at the southern foothills of the Eastern Carpathians involved the imposition of new toponyms and regional names. Natalia Korol's paper caused considerable controversy. The Lviv-based researcher focused on the Lemko group, presented identity issues in a way which was judged by some participants as one dimensional and lacking at attempt to problematise the topic. Bartłomiej Chromik, a researcher from Warsaw, shared his experiences and interpretations based on studies in the Hutsul region, examining the persistence and significance of Hutsul family lineages.

The subsequent panel was devoted to how historical events are depicted in Polish and Ukrainian literature, with presentations by Yulia Artymyshyn and Svitlana Zhurba. Here also certain terminological choices caused discussions. The third presentation in this panel, by Oksana Kuz'menko, was reminiscent of the presenter's thirty 30 years of work on collaborative projects with Polish researchers, including anthropological research on Polish-Ukrainian borderlands.

The last panel had only two presentations because Natalia Aksionova could not join the conference; Kharkiv was being severely shelled by Russia at the time, leaving her without access to the internet or electricity. Olena Martynchuk presented part of her PhD project, reflecting on her positionality in the field and the ethics of conducting research. As a young woman from Ukraine, she was a postgraduate at a Polish university who was also volunteering with a young group of Ukrainian refugees,

helping them with accommodation in their temporary home. Iryna Koval-Fuchylo rounded up the discussion by presenting the preliminary results of her research on the experiences of Ukrainian refugee women in Poland, France and Finland. She also raised issues of empathy and ethics as well as burnout in a researcher who shares the trauma of war and a forced exodus with her research participants.

The conference ended with the presentation of a special Ukrainian issue of Etnografia Polska[1] and a general discussion on the conference's main questions: how mutual research on Polish and Ukrainian issues has been conducted thus far, and how we want to see such research developing in the future; whether we need analytical concepts different from those proposed by Western academic traditions; and what new insights the Polish-Ukrainian debates bring to the discussions on decolonisation and its aftermath. In general, it seemed that the Soviet legacy and Russian influence were less of a focus for the participants than the question of communication with colleagues in the West, especially those who seemed to understand the situation in East/Central Europe well until recent events created new professional ruptures.

The researchers participating in the conference had the opportunity not only to discuss the aforementioned academic topics but also to engage with and experience diverse approaches to the cultural heritage of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland. On the one hand, this was made possible by attending a concert by the band Wernyhora, whose leader – a granddaughter of people deported in 1947 as part of Operation Vistula – strives to revive the musical heritage of her ancestors from the Bieszczady region through her music. On the other hand, participants visited the Museum of Folk Architecture, which, in constructing its narrative on the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, often draws on terminology whose decolonisation and rethinking were advocated for in academic debates during the conference.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Marianna Kril, an editor from Polish Radio in Warsaw, accompanied the conference participants for two days, conducting numerous interviews with those present in Sanok. Some of these interviews were broadcast over the following weeks on Polish Radio in Warsaw, including on Polish Radio for Ukraine.

The participants agreed that the work should continue, especially concerning the creation of new concepts and approaches with decolonising potential. There is a plan to publish the conference's results in Polish and Ukrainian periodicals. Some presentations are currently available in the open-access repository of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.[2] Such meetings will also continue in the future, online and, hopefully, also in person.

1 https://journals.iaepan.pl/ep/issue/view/193

2 https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/278130#structure

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This thematic issue of Ethnologia Polona delves into the convergence of war, state policies, and ethnic diversity in Russia, examining how Indigenous and non-Russian peoples have been impacted by Russia's ongoing military aggression against Ukraine. Sparked by the critical observation that representatives of non-Russian ethnic groups are disproportionately present among Russia's war casualties, this issue aims at challenging prevailing stereotypes. It ignites discussions about the role of ethnic minorities in the Russian war effort.

Employing diverse methodologies – including netnography, interviews with emigrants, and analyses of historical and archival sources – contributors explore topics such as the mobilization of Indigenous soldiers, the influence of ethnic identity in resistance movements, and the rise of anti-war diasporas advocating for decolonisation. The issue also addresses the challenges of conducting research on politically sensitive topics within an environment of increasing authoritarianism and censorship.

By presenting perspectives from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, this issue highlights the multifaceted experiences of ethnic minorities in Russia and their evolving relationship with the state. It seeks to deepen the understanding of the socio-political transformations reshaping the post-Soviet space under the shadow of war. The Authors not only capture the pressing realities of war but also offer critical insights into the resistance, adaptation, and aspirations of Russia's ethnic minorities as they navigate profound political and ideological shifts.