

# On the Challenges of Engagement and Doing Ethnographic Research in Conflict Zones

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## CONVERSATION

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# ON THE CHALLENGES OF ENGAGEMENT AND DOING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN CONFLICT ZONES

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Catherine Wanner invited several anthropologists to come together to discuss the challenges of conducting fieldwork in a region ravaged by war. The group consisted of four anthropologists, two who conduct research in Serbia and two in Ukraine. The group discussed the ethical complications that arise for anthropologists whose field site is or was the site of war as well as the responsibilities war creates for anthropologists who respond to the outbreak of armed combat by writing about state-sponsored violence and the process of enduring violence. Sandra King-Savic moderated this conversation, which took place on 7 July 2022 at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland before a live audience. The transcript of this two-hour conversation was shortened to fit this article and edited for clarity.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, ethics, war, Ukraine, Yugoslavia

Sandra King-Savic:

We have brought together a group of scholars to have a conversation about how our positionality and the dominant political ideologies that have contextualised our fieldwork experiences have shaped our research. Two have conducted research in the former Yugoslavia, two in the former Soviet Union, and all in regions that have

been the site of devastating armed combat. Research that engages the experiences of war inevitably has strong political implications. Over the years, we have asked ourselves, should our research aim to be ideologically dis/engaged? Anthropologists, in other words, have a choice: to either acknowledge that they have taken a side or not. If they have taken a side, the next issue is to establish to what degree they will advocate for that vision, knowing full well that no research is entirely neutral. When there is an opportunity to critique dominant ideologies, is this advisable or even laudable? Or, should anthropologists simply aim to analyse the ideologies they encounter by observing the values, emotions, and behaviours of interlocutors as they conduct research? By ideology I refer to a network of ideas that is not necessarily coherent, although it is often considered as such by its proponents. Ideologies, such as nationalism, populism, communism, or liberalism often reflect how a world should be and are often surprisingly at variance with the actions of its bearers. How is an anthropologist's ability or even obligation to critique these ideologies affected by his/her positionality? I ask you here to respond to these issues by way of a vignette drawn from your research experiences.

Jelena Tosic:

In spring 2002 I sat in a Belgrade café and was quite nervous before an interview. I had a meeting with an official representative of *Obraz*, a clero-fascist, far-right organisation with pronounced racist, antisemitic, homophobic and gender-conservative statements and actions. Its members were involved in attacking Gay Pride participants in the first Gay Pride Parade in Belgrade in June 2001 as well as repeatedly attacking Women in Black, an activist group that has commemorated the Srebrenica genocide since 1996. At the time of the mentioned meeting, *Obraz* was still a “legitimate” movement. Later, in 2012, it was officially banned and since 2015 it has registered again, interestingly under the label of a “Russian-Serbian Culture Organization,” only to be re-registered under another name in 2019. Serbia, at that time, was a very interesting, but difficult place to study — it was the aftermath of the NATO bombardment in 1999 and the fall of Milosevic in October 2000 and his extradition to The Hague in June 2001. Yet, it was before the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in March 2003. It was a time marked by a simultaneity of hope and disillusionment regarding democracy and socio-political change in general, which was the core interest of my doctoral research. I remember that I started the interview by saying that I do not share the same ideological views as my interview partner. Let us call him Dejan. My opening statement stressed the importance of talking in spite of our ideological differences and the need to get beyond them. We ended up having a nice conversation about our by and large incommensurable, but also intersecting, views on what was going on in Serbia and where the country should

be heading. Without focusing on Dejan's position and narrative as such, the aspect I would highlight most of all is the weird aura of a pleasant coffee chat, and the dual nature of the workings of ideology and its relationship to our research practices and ethnography. On the one hand, one can stress the explicit and manifest dimension of a dominant political ideology as a political instrument. At the same time, ideology functions to simplify, polarise, and prevent us from seeing certain processes and structures, which is crucial to explore. This dimension is particularly foregrounded by Marxist thought (ideology as false consciousness and occluding the relations of production), but it is insightful beyond Marxist approaches.

What irritated me in the aftermath of the interview with Dejan was not so much its content, but the smoothness of the interview. I asked myself: How could this interview be so unproblematic and even pleasant? Have we been moving merely on the surface, the visible and obvious aspects of our incompatible ideological positions? Did my ideological position prevent me from actually seeing some legitimate concerns of a clero-fascist position without subscribing to it? Could this conversation have been something else for Dejan, other than just presenting himself as a legitimate conversation partner to a PhD student "from the neoliberal West"? What were we both not addressing in our attempt to have a balanced and "peaceful" conversation?

I want to connect my fieldwork memories to what ethnographers of the far-right have been discussing lately. As the anthropologist Agnieszka Pasięka (2019) highlights, we know more about right-wing ideologies than about the people holding them. What she and others rightfully advocate is doing ethnography on and with people holding views we do not subscribe to without either condemning them in advance, exoticizing, or victimising them. Of further importance is to look deeper into histories and everyday practices of these movements and the people subscribing to them, in order to see them in the context of (re)producing worldviews and regimes of inequality they legitimise.

**In addition to calling for more ethnographic research on supporters of right-wing ideologies, I think we also need to continue talking about and exchanging experiences on how this kind of research is done concretely.** Making use of the dual nature of ideology can be quite useful here. This can imply a variety of research strategies: focusing explicitly on conversations where views and practices (including our own) are revealed or are made invisible; being especially attentive to 'common sense' claims and implications; having a closer look at the places, processes, and actors involved in reproducing particular ideologies; and bringing these reflections back to the conversations, up to and including considering how certain right-wing formations also occlude the ideological strength of other more powerful political actors. The last point brings me back to my vignette. *Obraz* and similar organisations are often seen as a political instrument by the present-day regime in Serbia for creating a quasi-ultra-right opposition, which the political elite can dominate.

I would like to conclude with a note of caution. Some time has passed since the (post)Yugoslav wars. I would not say that it makes it easier to think about them, especially not when someone suffered losses among family members and friends. However, I do think, and this is my personal experience, it does imply possibilities of access, return, debate, activism, mourning, and maybe even some kind of closure. The latter can also be grounded in research on how certain ideological strands play out through time and in socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts, and be used to mobilise and legitimise violence. I do wonder if or how we can actively build in reflections on ideology into our ethnographic research process under conditions of an on-going conflict, such as the current war against Ukraine.

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:

Thank you very much for this vignette. I am a sociologist with a background in feminist and state scholarship so being political is not unfamiliar. I have two related field-work memories that stand out for me. In my project, which I have been working on for two years now, I focus on citizenship, including the relations between displaced people or people who live under occupation in eastern Ukraine and the Ukrainian state. In the summer of 2021, I spent some time at the so-called entry-exit crossing points in eastern Ukraine, where people cross between the government-controlled and occupied parts of the regions. I was working in welfare offices along the former ‘contact line.’

The first memory I want to share is from the crossing point, the only one that was open during the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. Before the pandemic-related restrictions on movement across the ‘contact line,’ thousands of people used it every day to travel in either direction for a variety of reasons. When I was there, it was still very busy but much less than before. During the summer heat wave, I was looking for a place to hide from the sun, like most people at the crossing point, and I spent some time talking to an NGO worker. He was helping people who could not cross for whatever reason, usually document-related, in a hot overcrowded, unairconditioned metal container. During our conversation, we were approached by a woman, who, judging by her appearance, was obviously in mourning. She was asking for help in crossing after she was stopped by the Ukrainian border guards earlier. She explained that she wanted to attend her cousin’s funeral (in Russian, a cousin means a kind of brother). She was told that she could not cross because she was not on the separatist authorities’ list and could not prove blood relations to her cousin because of their different surnames. Yet, she insisted she was like a sister to him. Faced with a crying distressed person asking for help, the NGO worker very calmly said he could not do much. All he could do was write a letter of support to the border guards, with which she would be let back into the government-controlled territory.

She grabbed this opportunity, although the NGO worker was very sceptical and told her that it would probably not work. This encounter took place in the late morning.

The second time I met her was when she ran into the hot, crowded container around 3 pm, yelling at me, “Where is your colleague?” Then she ran into a smaller air-conditioned part of the same container where the state and the NGO representatives were cooling down. She screamed at them about having to walk in heat between the two block posts towards the occupied territory, which is a good distance away, just to be refused entry again. After letting some of her frustration out, she explained to me that the border guards of the de-facto authorities on the other side did not want to listen to her reasons or accept the paper provided by the NGO. She insisted that as a Ukrainian citizen, she should be able to cross into the occupied territories to attend the funeral, but the guards threw the paper in her face, saying that it would only be accepted by the other Ukrainian border guards and that her reasons would not work with them.

Later, I discussed the incident with the NGO worker, and he said, “They, the ordinary people, do not understand what is happening here. They do not understand that we are two separate entities, the Ukrainian side and the Luhansk de-facto authorities, and we do not talk to each other. What we do here is different from what they do there.” Although I initially accepted his interpretation of people’s frustration with complicated and oppressive rules, after weeks of interviews and further conversations, I realised that it is not actually what happened there. **This woman, like many other people I talked to, intentionally disregarded the *de facto* border between the Ukrainian state and the political entities in the occupied regions to resist the established and consequential, yet disturbing and meaningless, separation of Donbas from the rest of Ukraine.** When she insisted on her Ukrainian citizenship to the border guards of the unrecognised republics, she claimed a right to freedom of movement and assumed a (national) identity. However, she primarily appealed to the normalcy of the past when attempting to activate a citizenship that used to span across the newly created “border”. In the end, people’s everyday practices are governed by the established institutions and infrastructures that reflect the consequences of the war, be it the new “borders” or occupation regimes. However, the people I talked to refused to ideologically legitimise the existence of these new “borders” or new “states” even when they were obliged to accept or engage them. I imagine that similar processes — of simultaneously submitting to and learning to live with an occupation regime, and yet devising strategies of resistance — take place now in the occupied south and east of Ukraine.

Another incident speaks to my positionality when doing fieldwork in such a setting. I was in an empty social welfare office in a small settlement briefly occupied during the initial stage of the war in eastern Ukraine, talking to welfare workers.

When the only “clients” that day came by, I was promptly invited to interview them in the corridor while they waited for their documents to be processed. This is how I met two 55-year-old men, former miners, who had travelled from the outskirts of Donetsk to the government-controlled part of the region for the first time since the war started in order to apply for their pensions from the Ukrainian government. They started the conversation by speaking Ukrainian to me, probably because they had followed my exchanges with the Ukrainian state employees, who spoke mostly a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, which is common in the region. Knowing that the region they come from is mostly Russian speaking, I offered to switch to Russian, which they happily accepted. After briefly discussing why they were there and their experience crossing the “contact line”, they wanted to know more about me. I come from an industrial town in the neighbouring region. After learning that, the first question they asked me was if we are allowed to speak Russian where I come from. I was shocked by this question because of the obvious answer — of course, people are allowed to speak Russian, which is their native language. They were just as surprised by my answer as I was by the question. We both left the conversation thinking that propaganda created this perception of Ukrainian language policy.

I was also forced to reflect on how much I underestimated the importance of the language issue. I am a Russian-speaking Ukrainian, who learned Ukrainian in school, so I am bilingual. The question of language-based discrimination has always been way more complex than its politicised representation. It was mostly Ukrainian speakers who were marginalised in the region where I come from. The recent changes in Ukrainian language policy, which include requesting state employees to have Ukrainian language proficiency, were less consequential than in many other regions. After this interaction, I was left wondering if it really matters that language became a political issue. It is used to simplify and caricature the Russian war against Ukraine, both by Russian propaganda and sometimes in the perceptions of the West. Perhaps, the longer the war lasts, the more we will need to deal with the consequences of war as reflected in deeper cleavages between people that are not as easily overcome as language, no matter how frustrating or meaningless they are.

Catherine Wanner:

In your case, Sasha, you and your interlocutors share a language, heritage, and until recently citizenship. And yet different (mis)understandings of those same elements of everyday life have been forged through propaganda to separate you from the people you interviewed. I do research on religion in Ukraine as an American, which means that I come from a different country, speak another language, and I do not share the religious convictions, affiliations, and lifestyles of the people I study. Jelena began her interview with the politically-active cleric by acknowledging their ideological differ-

ences. This didn't produce the kind of cleavages that might have prevented engaged discussion. I usually also begin by acknowledging the differences in perspectives, belief systems, and values between myself and my interlocutors. However, unlike in Jelena's case, I have found on occasion that some deny these very cleavages. When they do, although it allows for trust that leads to meaningful dialogue to emerge, other issues arise. When members of a particular community espouse certain ideologies, beliefs, and practices, and assume the anthropologist is an "insider" and therefore shares their social and political values, the ethical responsibility of the researcher to set the record straight is keenly felt and yet more difficult to achieve.

I have studied a multitude of religious communities, from highly stigmatised, marginal groups to mainstream Orthodox believers who, before the war, subscribed to a generalised, apolitical ambient religiosity as "Just Orthodox". Doing research on religion raises the stakes in striking the appropriate balance between observation and participation, so as not to foster any illusions that the outsider, non-religious anthropologist is really an insider member of the community. And yet, on several occasions, after taking great pains to explain my positionality, namely that I am not a practitioner of whatever faith group I am studying, nor am I of Ukrainian origin, and that I intend to write a book, I belatedly realise that some of the people I am interviewing have dismissed all that as untrue or irrelevant. Cynically, they think people will say anything to get what they want, which renders how I present myself as meaningless. They decide for themselves who I am. On occasion, after seeing interlocutors listen very patiently to me explain who I am, what my research is, and why I am conducting it, I later realised that they have decided to ignore all that because they have decided that I am someone else.

Problems emerge when they publicly present me as the insider they want me to be. Two instances were particularly wrenching for me. Once at a large charismatic megachurch service, before several thousand parishioners, unbeknownst to me, the head pastor called me to the microphone as "Sister Cathy" and asked me to "witness" about my faith. It was impossible to remain seated. My choice was to set the record straight and publicly humiliate him or overlook the "Sister Cathy" part and introduce myself in the usual secular vein that I ordinarily would with no mention of faith or religion. I opted for the latter and I am sure the pastor was disappointed. To this day I am uncomfortable when I recall that moment. But I don't know how I could have avoided it other than to never have studied this group in the first place.

As part of another project on deinstitutionalized religious practices, I travelled from Eastern Ukraine to Western Ukraine with a pilgrimage group. One of the women in the group was very pious, whereas all the others were "Just Orthodox", meaning curious and enthusiastic to be participating but were not devout believers. The leader of the pilgrimage group paired me, the foreigner, with the single person in the group who was a committed Orthodox believer. On the long journey, we had ample time



to talk. The pious woman, for some reason, decided I was a Jew from Ukraine who immigrated to the U.S., became religious there, converted to Orthodoxy, and had now returned to Ukraine to go on pilgrimage. Not one word of this was true but she persisted in introducing me in such terms.

The question is then, why do some interlocutors collapse the differences and imagine the anthropologist to be like themselves, even when the lifeworlds, values, and political orientations are drastically different? I have come to understand two things about positionality: sometimes people just want to see you in their own likeness because this allows them to build enough trust to verbalise the thoughts, fears, regrets, and hopes that they so desperately long to share. To do this, some interlocutors need to remake your biography into who they would like you to be, instead of who you are. This allows them to speak freely and openly and achieve some kind of therapeutic effect from the dialogue. Interpersonal dynamics, along with the willingness or need to talk, influence how our positionality is interpreted for us in spite of the best intentions to be authors of our own biography.

Research on religion, however, exacerbates the tensions that might be created by differing positionalities. Ideological commitments, along with the moral convictions and the personalised, emotional experiences that feed them, are not only verbalised. They are also enacted. I attended a charismatic megachurch, but I declined to preach. I went on a pilgrimage, but I did not venerate icons, bathe in a sacred spring, or perform many of the other rituals even those who professed to be non-believing did. In other words, when doing research on religion, deciding how to verbally engage interlocutors is the first step. One also has to decide how ideological positionality will be enacted and publicly practised.

Sandra King-Savic:

Thank you all for these insights into your positionality, which I think also reveal how our research and our research positions can be grounded in certain assumptions and ideas, which sometimes lead to misrecognition and ignorance of alternative ways of thinking and the different positionalities of informants. An alternative way of thinking can generate ideas that are otherwise invisible to us in what I would call “blind spots.” I would like to discuss something Jelena mentions, namely that we talk about “the other part of Europe.” The other part of Europe relates to blind spots that we all have to some degree. We see how the capacity to store historical information is connected to this question. When we go back to 24 February 2022, journalists and commentators often stated that this was the first war on European soil since World War II. Such a statement is, in my opinion, loaded with ideological signifiers because it starts by labelling people and places. This ought not necessarily be a normative and value-driven statement. Yet, we need to consider the ideological components behind

the establishment of such narratives. I come to this question from my own research on the wars of succession in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. How do you make sense of the framing of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as the first war on European soil since 1945? This raises the questions as to who is European, what is Europe, and how we categorise people? I wonder how you understand this framing. Does this short-lived historical memory and subsequent blind spots influence our own thinking as to who is European, and what being European means?

Catherine Wanner:

**I think that the current Russo-Ukrainian War is seen in very different terms than the Yugoslavia wars were, suggesting how difficult, and perhaps even misguided, it can be to compare wars.** Yugoslavia was seen as a single state that through wars at times gave birth to multiple states, whose impact was localised primarily in the Balkans. You are right that these are all political assumptions that invite dismissal of the responsibility to respond to the suffering all wars inevitably generate. These reactions contrast sharply with the outrage expressed over the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which drew on a recognition of thirty years of Ukrainian independence and the violation of established state sovereignty by another, more powerful state.

I am not sure there is so much historical amnesia regarding the former Yugoslavia as there is selective historical recall in justifying the empathic and ultimately supportive Western response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To motivate concern and engagement, the same commentators who refer to “the other Europe” remind us that when Hitler annexed Austria and the Sudetenland, there was little reaction. Then Germany invaded Poland, and eventually the entire globe became engulfed in war. Putin waged war in the “near abroad prior to 2022 and took the territories of neighbouring countries with little impunity. He annexed Crimea and fomented an armed insurgency in Eastern Ukraine for six years before launching a full-scale invasion “of the second largest country in Europe”, as is often said. In reacting to the Russo-Ukrainian war, history is marshalled to offer a cautionary tale that combines with Cold War rhetoric to demonise Russia. A David versus Goliath narrative quickly takes root that offers clearer ethical and moral judgments of who is the victim and who is the victimizer than the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s did.

Another factor fuelling the engagement in the war in Ukraine as part of Europe, without the qualifier, is the media frenzy it has generated. This is the first internet war where every person with a mobile phone is also a documenter of war crimes and human resilience. Ukrainians realised, especially after the Maidan in 2013-14, that social media is a great motivator of collective action. The emotive value of seeing babies born in underground metro stations, refugees fleeing with their pets in tow, and hearing air raid sirens and explosions from missile attacks in real time on the evening

news has cultivated empathy for the suffering of Ukrainians. This has prompted an engaged activism to respond to this suffering by either contributing money or providing some other tangible form of support. From this engagement flows the narrative that we owe Ukrainians because they are defending (our) European values of democratic governance and the rule of law.

As anthropologists should we join in and encourage such activist responses to this war? To all wars? Should it be an obligation of scholars working in conflict zones to cultivate solidarity with the suffering of *all* peoples involved, whether that suffering is occurring in Europe, the “other Europe”, or elsewhere? In other words, as an anthropologist who primarily researches the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for Ukrainians, should I also highlight how some Russians are suffering economically, morally, and emotionally because of what their government is doing? Are these Russians, or even all Russians, victims as well? And, if so, should their suffering be qualified or simply considered on a par with combat-induced suffering? These become pertinent issues because, although a tragedy is unfolding today in Ukraine, perhaps tomorrow it will be in Russia. How we communicate now who is victimised, who is an aggressor, and who is European will have consequences for future research and how the broader public responds to violence. At this time, Adam Michnik’s (2022) assertion that “We are all Ukrainians Now”, the title of an article he wrote after the invasion began, which collapses the cleavages that could divide us, has come to dominate Western responses to the war in Ukraine. In contrast, in the 1990s, the dominant narrative was that the wars broke out in the “other Europe” and affected “other Europeans”, which created distance and a more muted response, if not indifference, to suffering.

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:

I have been researching political discourses on gender and nationalism in Ukraine for years, and “Europe” is such an empty signifier in these discourses. It can be used and abused by both sides. Liberals draw on the European gender equality legislation, gender mainstreaming, and freedom of expression, and right-wing politicians draw on conservative values of “Christian Europe” opposing ratification of the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women. **At the same time, ironically, Russian propaganda claims to be defending European values, such as traditional gender roles and sexuality, which are being challenged in Europe. Can we say this category of European values is meaningful? This is worth talking about.** “Europe” is interesting as an empty signifier. It is interesting to look at which aspect of the idea of Europe is mobilised at what moment and what goes into a black box. Now, as you said, Cathy, Ukrainians are very adept at finding each and every winning argument for themselves, and this is one of those arguments that works.

Catherine Wanner:

I think one thing that your example shows is that the idea of Europe might be contested but it still has positive connotations. This is why both sides evoke Europe to support their political positions. Europe can be used to validate and support all positions because it is appealing. I think that both sides believe that using the idea of Europe will generate support, no matter what the specifics of the political and ideological positions are.

Jelena Tasic:

When we try to understand the workings of ideology it is crucial to look for “blind spots” in terms of, on the one side, claims and implications that appear logical, obvious, and commonsensical, and on the other side as aspects of debates and interpretations one would expect to encounter, but which are absent. This is something that I try to do all the time when I do ethnographic research since both an over pronounced implication of “givenness” and an absence of certain questions and themes are, in a way, blind spots, which can point us to how ideology works and plays out in a particular setting or situation. And, of course also, in a reflexive sense, to the ideological implications of my expectation as a researcher to find some issues raised and discussed in a particular way. When we speak about the image of Europe in the context of nationalism in former Yugoslavia, it is important to keep a comparative outlook and try to look at the debates in all parts of former Yugoslavia. It shows that not only nationalisms, but critics of nationalism were and are present everywhere and the images of Europe they invoke are highly similar and yet contradictory. What they share are particular blind spots, such as the implication that the “nationalists on the other side” were radically different instead of recognising that they actually share similar ideological elements and political (if not military) means and strategies. Furthermore, an essential blind spot of how these wars were and partly still are portrayed is the underrepresentation of antinationalist and antiwar sentiments and initiatives across conflict lines. Sidelining these aspects of the war was a tool of legitimising the war and keeping nationalism going long after the armed conflicts had ended.

Of course, I don't have the knowledge and expertise to speak about the war in Ukraine and one should keep in mind the radically different war scenarios in these two cases. We had a conversation a few weeks ago with Alexander Etkind about blind spots in terms of representing what is going on in Russia at the moment, especially in terms of opposition to the war against Ukraine and which particular segments of the Russian population are sent into the war by the Putin regime.

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:

I think the question of blind spots, assumptions, and oversimplifications is interesting. This brings me to the discussion of the difference between an ideological position and a political position. The fact that I find objectionable the aggression of one state against another over national territory and political authority and occupation of this national territory already means that ideologically I subscribe to the international order of national borders. Or is it military aggression alone that is ideologically opposed? Can we even detach the occupation of state territory from human suffering that begins at the moment of military aggression and continues under this occupation regime? **At this stage of the war, I am very comfortable with being politically engaged. I would even say that being politically disengaged and still doing empirical research would be unethical, in my opinion.** A clear political position is what gives me the energy and focus to continue with this work.

To respond to what you said, Cathy, I find it reasonable to rethink our understanding of the earlier stage of the war, post-2014, in light of the recent Russian aggression. As you said, reflecting on what kinds of terms we adopt is crucial. I used the more neutral term, non-government-controlled territories, before the full-scale invasion when talking about parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. By doing so, I could focus on what was actually the focal point of my study — state authority, sovereignty, and governance — and remain critical of state policies trying to regain control over the territory by controlling the population.

Now, I refer to these territories as occupied to signify the different way they are governed since the full-scale invasion and the similarities to other occupied parts of Ukraine. While there are several distinct occupation regimes in Ukraine, and our job as researchers is to understand how occupation functions and what it means for people's everyday lives in different regions, the fact of occupation is something I would like to see agreement on. While we should be self-reflective and cautious with blind spots, to take the most analytically pristine and sanitised terms is an attempt to keep our distance from the object of our study. In a way, this is an academic standard or, rather, an ideal. However, there is power and transparency in recognizing your positionality and embracing the political in the research, as feminist researchers amply prove. Political engagement is something I consider to be necessary, at least for my own research right now. In this respect, as Jelena said, research during a war and research in or on a post-war region might be different.

Sandra King-Savic:

In keeping with the topic of distance and temporality in a different context — and this may be an uncomfortable question — all of us are conducting research on “post” or active conflict regions, but all of us are also not facing difficulties in Switzerland

or the United States, respectively. We are not armchair scientists, to be sure, and yet we are geographically removed from the conflict and “post-conflict” regions, even if we are travelling back and forth researching on a regular basis. This connects to the question of the “field”, which signifies, in a way, colonial undertones that we may be partaking in, however unwittingly. Do you see conflicts or potential conflicts resulting from geographical distance or proximity in your research?

Catherine Wanner:

That is a tricky question. In a war situation, it can become unethical to distance yourself or, conversely, unethical to insert yourself, depending on the context. After 2015, as a U.S. citizen, you could not travel to Crimea or other non-government-controlled areas without running the risk of losing your funding. That limits what kind of research can or cannot be done. Right now, granting agencies will not support travel to Ukraine, which means that traditional fieldwork is becoming difficult to conduct. So, what is left to do? In a wartime situation, inaction is not possible. You have to be inventive. In the past, online ‘chatography’ was frowned upon because of the decontextualized nature of dialogue. When there is limited electricity, sometimes during virtual conversations you do not even get see the person, their gestures, or hear their tone of voice. Their words can be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted. But if the reality of war right now limits access, technology also makes continuous fieldwork possible. Whatsapp, Zoom, Skype, and a variety of other apps allow us to stay in touch with interlocutors and to be in multiple places at once. Moreover, social media plays a significant role as the site where our interlocutors are interacting with each other and gaining information and new ideas that shape their own ideological engagements.

Having said that, after the invasion of Ukraine began, multiple initiatives to conduct oral histories of the experiences of war, violence, dispossession, and displacement were launched. Some scholars sharply criticised these efforts to document the experience of war saying it was way too soon and there was too little recognition of the fact that these were traumatised people. Making them retell what they had been through amounts to a reenactment of the trauma of displacement, some argued. Moreover, the criticism continued, if an interviewer repeatedly hears stories of excruciating human suffering day after day, they too will become traumatised. Interviewers themselves need specific kinds of support to conduct this type of research, which would not be the case with a multitude of other forms of research and research topics.

I think there are merits to these criticisms. No one should be forced to speak and no one should be obliged to listen. But I also see people who feel the need to say out loud what they have been through and to share what they have seen. Someone should be there to listen, and hopefully someone who is trained to do so. This is

where I think it can be useful to have a variety of interviewers, including some who come from another place and are perceived as outsiders, especially as it relates to blind spots. A variety of interviewer positionalities are needed. If you have never experienced war or displacement, as I have not, there are some things that you can, and in fact need to, ask about because you otherwise cannot imagine them. Sometimes people are willing to reflect and explain the obvious or make an effort to describe things at a much more basic and therefore expansive level for those who have never experienced them. Otherwise, the “blind spots” of outsiders might lead to misunderstandings that interviewers from the region often do not have. It is not my goal, nor do I think it should be anyone’s goal, to speak for refugees and the displaced. Rather, for my part, I hope to facilitate the recording of the experiences of war so that they can be shared with a broader audience and so that those who have committed war crimes can be held accountable.

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:

I have thought a lot about this question and listened to the ongoing debates since February 2022 on whether we can and should do empirical research right now. I very much agree with your assessment, Cathy. In the end, my colleague and I decided to go ahead with a project to interview people who have been displaced on how they made the decision to either leave their homes, stay in Ukraine, or go abroad, and finally, how they chose their destinations. Just yesterday, we had the first supervision session with a psychologist for interviewers and transcribers in our project, which we scheduled before most interviews were to be conducted, except for pilot conversations. One of the reasons we decided to go ahead with the study is that displaced people, most of whom arrived at their new homes several months ago, want to tell their stories. The initial traumatic reaction to the events that forced someone to leave home and the traumatic experience of displacement itself could have been, to an extent, processed by now. After several months of bureaucratic hurdles abroad or in Ukraine, people are often trying to reconstruct their experience into a cohesive story. There is a sense that people want to build a narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end, even though they themselves are very aware that wherever they are right now, this is probably not the end. The psychological supervision throughout this project is meant to equip interviewers with tools to foresee and handle emotional distress, but more importantly, to talk through their own interview experiences with the moderation of a professional. This, in equal measure, concerns people who transcribe the interviews.

I appreciate and agree with your perspective on the role of ‘outsiders’ in such research. We will have a very different situation, and I guess we will see how it goes. Most of the people who conduct interviews in this project went through the same experiences as the interview participants. That is another reason why there are several

supervision sessions planned during the research phase. Hopefully, this will lead to a closer relationship developing in the setting of the interview and a sense of trust evolving in the course of interviews.

As to the distance from the 'field', in my case, the conflict zone is also my home. I reviewed these paragraphs while visiting my family in eastern Ukraine during another Russian air attack on civil infrastructure and civilians all over Ukraine.

Sandra King-Savic:

Beyond interviews and other textual representations of conflict and suffering, what are the other sources anthropologists and the public have to bring to bear on understanding the causes and effects of this war?

Catherine Wanner:

A friend of mine recently sent me drone photographs that give a bird's-eye view of destruction. They show buildings with multiple floors destroyed so that the viewer sees all the way down to the ground. Home after home is in ruins. I have no idea where this drone and its photos came from, but I noted how fast these photos went to Facebook, and all kinds of other outlets where they were repeatedly shared. The photos make undeniable the destruction that we all know is occurring. They generate empathy for the suffering Ukrainians are currently enduring. But what about after this conflict is over? We have seen in the case of the former Yugoslavia that once the armed combat ceases, often our empathy dries up. Even when it remains vibrant, as I think it currently does as a reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, emotional responses are often limited. We no longer see or feel the suffering in Syria, Somalia, or Pakistan. Even though the media gives us eyes and ears everywhere, our empathy for some often leads to ignorance of others. There is just not enough emotional bandwidth to take in the impressions of suffering from past or active conflicts elsewhere. This brings us back to proximity and different kinds of Europes. Yugoslavia seemed far away for those who were not from there, whereas Russia's war in Ukraine is not contained and therefore seems close by. We are all living with its consequences in some form. There is certainly enormous concern in the Baltics, Poland, and in the Balkans, given their histories, which suggest that **perhaps this war will not end soon. Perhaps we are witnessing aggression that merely has valleys and peaks.**

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:

Then the question is, are these pictures actually enough to elicit action, to make people do something? I guess the question that is more relevant to us is: how does this change the relevance of our research? Our research was perceived as being on the



margins. Now this changes. Does it take a war for others to take our research seriously? I would like my research to be relevant, to have some genuine impact on the way that things develop. But we are still operating against the background of a fairly western cannon kind of knowledge, and understandings of history and literature. We are the outliers, which means we have to translate the events into the consciousness of others and establish a framework for interpreting these regions and their histories.

Catherine Wanner:

This process always happens against a political and ideological backdrop, right? The Cold War set a precedent as did 9/11. When there is a perceived threat, there's an interest in acquiring knowledge about those places. That research is relevant. I think your point is that we should be genuinely committed and interested in others anyway, without waiting for armed combat to erupt. However, the same kind of perceptions of threat, which stimulate interest, also focus attention. Sometimes only later do we realise our blind spots, or the places our attention bypassed and the regions where we didn't produce a great deal of knowledge. I think that this war in 2022, in comparison with the 2008 war in Georgia or other earlier wars in Moldova or Chechnya, has provoked into existence perspectives that our field has been overly Russo-centric and a recognition that we need to decolonialize our own knowledge and to rethink our region. **This war has provoked a sweeping re-thinking of what is Europe, where it begins and ends, and what may be beyond Europe. This invasion has also prompted a reconsideration of Russia, the Soviet Union, and the kinds of histories, cultures, and exchanges that might have connected some of those regions to many other parts of the world.** Our perceptions of threat during the Cold War led to a laser focus on Moscow. We considered other regions as objects of Moscow's policies, and they became our peripheral interests because we perceived these regions to have minimal agency, even when they were situated in conflict zones. This was made glaringly obvious in the 1990s. Now I think there is a greater cognizance of the fact that we need to think more in terms of histories of encounters, entanglements, and cross-border commonalities as opposed to within frames of narrow state sovereignty. I hope that is what we have learned in the aftermath of our penchant for seeing Yugoslavia or even the Soviet Union as single entities conceptualised in terms of a centre and its periphery.

Jelena Tasic:

Yes, this is one source of the blind spots we discussed earlier. All this can prompt us to think about what impact, if any, did the critical scholarship on former Yugoslavia and its dissolution have today. What is the impact of this knowledge we are produc-

ing with so much personal and professional effort in countless panels, round tables, and publications? I see it as a privilege to have been able to gain an education, to build on the resources life as a transnational migrant can offer, and to be able to devote my time to develop critical perspectives on nationalism, forced migration, and the aftermath of violent conflicts, which I also see as my personal responsibility due to my aforementioned privilege. But a crucial question is: what significance does the knowledge we produce actually have and for whom?

Sandra King-Savic:

I have a question relating to temporality and empathy. I am thinking of Arlie Hochschild's book, *Strangers in their Own Land* (2016). Hochschild says that empathy is something that allows us to cross a bridge and understand what is happening elsewhere, including in places we do not know, have no access to, and/or do not speak the languages. Some of us can and do travel to conflict zones, others are not able to, or simply do not wish to do that. What does this do to our collective sense of empathy?

Catherine Wanner:

Empathy can be a two-edged sword. Empathy becomes paired with its twin, the denial of empathy when it creates a sense of an in-group that suffers unjustly and an out-group that is either blamed for that suffering or is otherwise excluded from receiving empathy. While empathy, as a bridge, makes possible the awareness of suffering of some people (an in-group), it can also deny empathy to others (members of an out-group). All Ukrainians are clearly suffering, whether they live in Ukraine or not, and this makes for a very elastic understanding of who is in the in-group. The anguish of seeing innocent, frightened children and dogs in bomb shelters suffering unjustly carries the propensity to create an equally expansive understanding of the out-group. Empathic emotional reactions run the risk of casting all Russians as members of the out-group, as responsible for this suffering, as supporters of Putin and the Wagner Group, and as participants on some level in war crimes, which is clearly not true. So, when empathy creates a bridge to proclaim some deserving of empathy, it can also prompt specific forms of micro-activism that can sweep up others, place them in an out-group, and deny recognition for the ways this war has affected them. This potentially creates blind spots to recognizing forms of suffering and assessing responsibility for the atrocities that are being committed. This war is widely considered a "just war" and therefore it could potentially last for some time. We see from the Yugoslav case that ending combat is only the first step in another long chapter of recovery. How to create a "just peace" in the aftermath of this war should already be a concern of ours.

Sandra King-Savic: Thanks to all of you for being here, and for the engaged and constructive conversation.

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