

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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R E V I E W

CONFERENCE REPORT: FROM A POLYPHONY OF
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POLAND-UKRAINE
CONFERENCE AT THE OPEN-AIR FOLK
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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 Józwiak 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 researcher 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 an 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 *Et-nografia 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 re-thinking 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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