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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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