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3 INDIGENOUS STUDENTS OF THE RUSSIAN ARCTIC AND THE SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION

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Introduction

This essay explores what Indigenous students in Russia think about war when faced with its proximate reality. Would they be willing to trade their studies for participation in military action, or would they want to avoid participating in the Special Military Operation (hereafter referred to as SMO) started on 24 February 2022? Would they want to insist on ending the SMO or would they prefer to leave their universities and colleges to survive? These are the questions I asked students in face-to-face conversations and for which I sought out answers to in social media discussions. I also conducted an online survey of students at St. Petersburg University. Their responses to the questions and follow-up conversations helped me understand how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected Indigenous students from Siberia and the Russian North.

My approach

In my approach to working with a student focus group, my methods included survey, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation (cf. Ziotdinova 2016). Surveys are the safest method to collect quantitative and qualitative information. In my case, the safety of the participants was a priority; my entire study was based on not harming them in any way. To create a list of survey participants, I contacted only students whom I knew personally or who were recommended to me by people I trusted, using "snowball sampling." I categorized potential survey participants into three main groups based on their attitudes toward the SMO: "supportive of the SMO," "against the SMO," and "indifferent to the SMO."

The majority of students on my list of potential participants eventually declined to participate in the survey. This was an expected reaction in winter-spring 2022, in the context of widespread suspicion and harassment for engaging in protest activity at today's Russian universities. I do not provide any demographic information, nor people's sources of funding for tuition fees, to protect the anonymity and thus the safety of the survey participants.

With a much smaller sample than expected, I sent consenting participants the survey questions with the option to respond to me in writing or verbally. I obtained all

responses through face-to-face conversations with focus group members via Zoom. Survey participants preferred to respond orally to the questions, to ensure that there would be no written evidence of their attitudes toward the current events in the country. I informed all those who agreed to participate in the survey that they had the right to stop participating in the survey at any time, as well as the option to withdraw their responses from use in my analysis (Timofeev 2009). Survey participants were also assured that no recording devices would be used for the survey. The only means of documenting their opinions were my handwritten notes. All survey participants explicitly asked that their personal information not be published.

Since I am an Indigenous student myself, I am well aware of the specifics of the university life for those coming to St. Petersburg from other, often distant regions. I also sought information using participant observation by engaging in daily student life (Mudryk 2017). This insider's view provided me with details and knowledge regarding what students were thinking and dreaming and how they lived on a daily basis. Before the war, despite the growing pressure on democratic freedom in the 2010s, the student environment in Russia had a much freer atmosphere, where everyone could voice their opinions and thoughts on current life and the future of their region and country without fear of punishment. When the SMO began, the authorities cracked down on protesting youth, causing students to shut down. Now, from the outside it looked as if the majority continued to live as if nothing had happened, while others withdrew into themselves. In this situation, "participant" observations no longer reflected the real situation. To understand what the students were really thinking, I needed to find a means of communication in which they were more protected, that is, remained fully anonymous. Social networks became a relevant tool here.

Thus, I turned to a participatory observation approach for social media (Podvesovski and Budylski 2014). Online social groups are now a significant and quick venue for sharing information for student focus groups and were very useful to my research. I monitored online social groups through daily browsing of social media such as VK, Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook. Social media postings have multiple formats such as text, images, audio, and video, which, on the one hand expands the amount of documented information, but on the other hand makes it difficult to analyze. Therefore, I limited myself to monitoring text messages. My role was also limited to observation only, because of the high level of suspicion that is now commonplace in Russia. I noticed that most social network participants use online social networks only periodically to read news items and comments on them, and almost never participate in discussions, let alone initiate them.

What did we learn?

In accordance with my research plan, I conducted an online survey of St. Petersburg University students in the fall of 2023. I asked 30 students to answer the questions of the questionnaire I developed, or to simply talk about topics related to these questions. As expected, about two third of the 30 potential interviewees declined to participate in the survey. Those who agreed to talk sometimes avoided answering directly and asked that their names and demographics be withheld. The refusal to participate and the request to not use personal data reflect the contemporary reality of today's Russia. Young people do not trust the university authorities and fear persecution from them.

Since I am a student myself, much of what concerns St. Petersburg students is very familiar to me. Therefore, I can confidently assert that, along with social media monitoring, the method of participant observation remained essential for my research. As I mentioned earlier, my research was based on the semi-structured interview method. During the interview, I followed the prepared questionnaire as a guide, but the participants were free to respond however they wished. Interviewees could limit themselves to answering "yes" or "no" or "don't know," but could also reflect aloud to explain their answer or justify their claims. I have presented the responses of the interview participants in pie charts, and commented below to elucidate the context of the responses, especially the short ones.

My first question ("Has the Special Military Operation affected your academic plans?") sought to assess the situation of students after the start of Russia's SMO in Ukraine in February 2022.

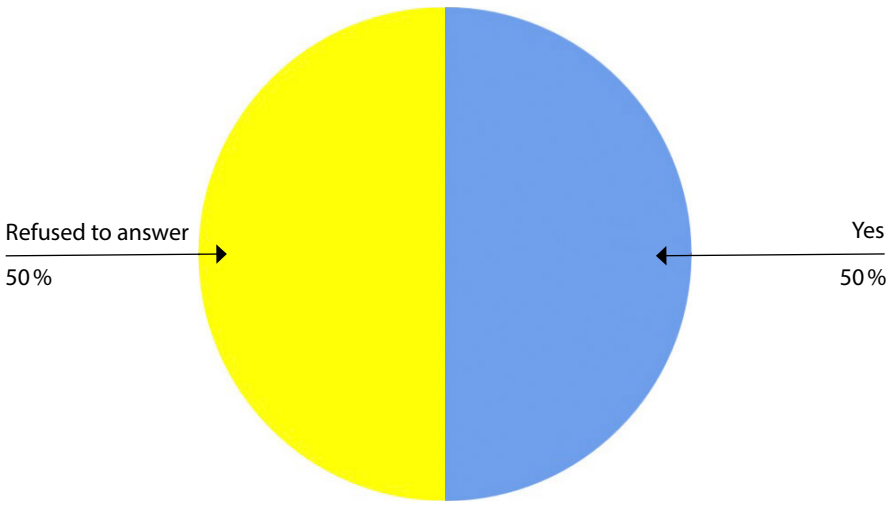

Fig. 1 Has the Special Military Operation affected your academic plans?

Before the SMO and during its first months, the dominant opinion in social media discussions was that for many Russians the ruble exchange rate did not matter much, as most citizens do not travel abroad. This view was supported by the media. These discussions ignored the fact that the international cooperation network in which Russia is integrated, even now under broad international sanctions, has permeated all spheres of the economy, including personal consumption. Statistics show that inflation in Russia is quite high (Ibragimov and Rafikov 2023), and the ruble-dollar exchange rate fell by a third during the SMO period (Shvetsov and Shvetsova 2022). This obviously should have reduced the purchasing power of Russians and greatly affected the quality of students' lives.

Another objective of the first question was to identify how students reacted to the war and its consequences for them. Did they support or oppose the SMO? The perception of positive or negative trends in personal well-being is a fairly accurate marker of a person's attitude toward events. A positive reaction, despite economic hardship, indicated that the individual supported government policy and was willing to endure hardship to achieve the government's goals. A negative reaction indicated both a realistic assessment of the situation and that the individual was most likely against the current strategy, but for security reasons kept silent about it.

Responding interviewees indicated that they initially saw positive trends in the SMO, but that the situation worsened over time. One person responded literally as follows: "I thought the SMO would end in a couple of months and things would change." Probably for the same reason, another person even made a statement that he was initially "in favor" of the SMO and then changed to be "against" it. Survey participants who did not answer this question most likely feared expulsion from the university. Since the beginning of the SMO, Russian legislation has grown more restrictive and any activity against the war regularly has led to civil and even criminal cases. Yet, in general, both direct and indirect responses of the survey participants indicate that students are rather against the SMO, although I recognize that the "sample size" was small.

The following three questions focused on how the Special Military Operation affected the plans of the student's family. To facilitate responses to the general question, I added two additional questions. Specifically, I asked about the challenges and benefits of the situation. I asked this question to see if the students had new perspectives in their daily lives.

According to the participants' responses, the SMO has literially affected nearly everyone's family. Formally, only half of the respondents answered positively that additional problems had appeared. They indicated that disagreements in their family had arisen because of attitudes towards the SMO. One participant mentioned that in order not to quarrel with his relatives, he tried not to talk with them about the SMO. In his family, some members supported military actions, some were reserved, some clearly opposed it, and there were even those who had left Russia. The range of

attitudes depended on people's political leanings, but also reflected the economic situation. Changes in prices, quality and selection of food and manufactured goods seem to have intensified the disagreements and motivations in these families.

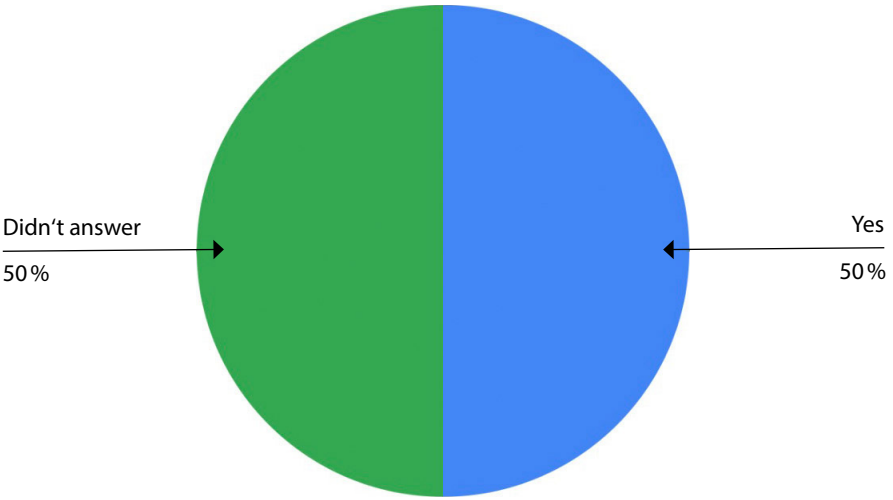

Fig. 2 Have new problems appeared at work, in studies, with housing? Any other problems?

Those students who did not answer the question were very likely to fear possible harassment for participating even in an anonymous survey. This indirectly points to similar contradictory reactions to the effects of the SMO on their families. Summarizing the answers, I found that the SMO was not something distant for the Indigenous students: they perceived the war in Ukraine as something very close, if in a variety of ways.

Although the next question ("Have new opportunities appeared at work, in studies, with housing? Any others?") seemed to be the opposite of the previous one, it also helped me to understand the attitudes of the survey participants towards SMO.

The majority of survey participants did not notice any significant new opportunities. This may be due to the fact that students spend most of their time studying, and in the summertime they only work part-time, mainly in the service sector. Only one of the participants reported that there were many more job offers, although wages had decreased significantly compared to the pre-war period. He attributed the large number of vacancies to the fact that after the mobilization was announced, a significant number of qualified specialists left Russia, frightened of possible hardship and even death in the Special Military Operation. His interpretation of labor market trends generally coincided with the findings of Rakhmatullina and Babenko (2015), who point to the economic and social causes of the "brain drain" as the main reasons for

the emigration of academics, albeit with an indirect reference to restrictions on freedoms and corruption in Russia during Putin's rule. The SMO and the international sanctions that followed it intensified already negative economic trends.

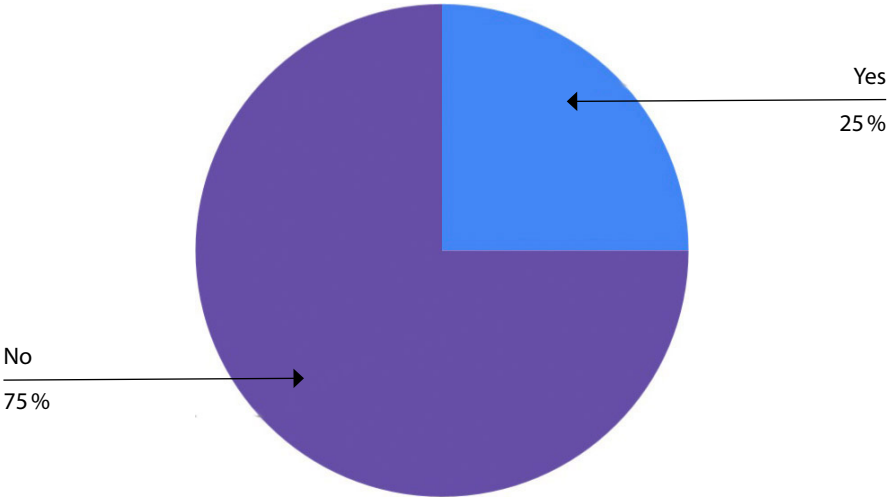

Fig. 3 Have new opportunities appeared at work, in studies, with housing? Any others?

My next question ("How often do you find yourself discussing news about SMO") also sought to understand students' attitudes towards the SMO. The authorities justified the invasion of Ukraine by launching a huge propaganda campaign in the media (Meduza.io 2023). When the SMO had just started, I myself had to face propaganda at the university. Teachers in lectures and extracurricular activities disseminated a standard set of claims that the "neo-Nazis" ("Ukro-fashisty") had seized power in Ukraine and were oppressing Russian culture. The propaganda lectures repeated a set of clichés that asserted that Ukraine was not an independent state and was in fact an integral part of Russia. After nearly two years of rehashing the rationale for invading Ukraine, the President's Outcomes of the Year with Vladimir Putin argued that the main goals of the SMO "have not changed. I will remind you what we talked about then. About the denazification of Ukraine, about its demilitarization, about its neutral status" (Kremlin.ru 2023).

Survey responses indicated that throughout the SMO, its rationale and justification have remained dominant topics in extracurricular activities at the university and in students' daily conversations. The majority of students confirmed that news about the SMO in Ukraine has dominated their sources of information, be it the news media, billboards on buildings, or social media. This points to an extremely aggressive propaganda work funded by the state. It may also point to the forced participation of

students in social media groups dedicated to the SMO. If a student is not a member of a "patriotic online group," there is a risk of being blacklisted as a war opponent. Being on such a list is highly likely to result in expulsion from the university, and even criminal prosecution under the article on "disseminating false information about the actions of the Russian armed forces" (BBC News Russian Service 2023b). Independent searches of social media sources for information about the SMO may also indicate students' own interest in obtaining additional information because they do not feel that they have enough information from the official media or do not trust it.

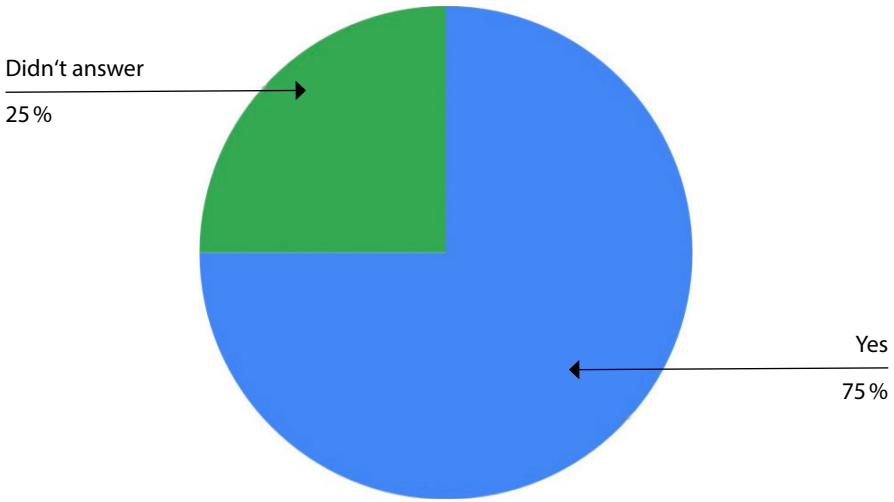

Fig. 4 Do you find yourself often discussing news about SMOs?

My next question ("Do you want more news about the SMO or do you prefer other news?") explored the topic of the news dominance by the SMO; I hoped to find out how satisfied students were with this state of affairs. The question I asked was actually as follows: "Would you like this trend (dominance of news about the war in Ukraine) to continue or would you prefer more news about your university, city, region?"

Opinions of the survey participants were equally divided on this question. The pie chart shows that half of the survey participants would like to maintain the dominance of news about the SMO, while the other half would not. A survey participant who answered negatively explained that he would like more news about Indigenous peoples and regions and less about the SMO. Finally, judging from his intonation and behavior during the survey, a student who did not answer this question seemed to disapprove of the SMO but feared persecution and therefore preferred to refrain from answering most of the questions. Students who wanted to receive information about the SMO attributed this to a desire to know the true state of affairs in the war. They were concerned about the possibility that the number of casualties was under-

estimated or underreported, and that the situation was actually worse than the media described. It can be assumed that interest in news about the SMO was also due to fears of mobilization – that is, the students being directly concerned about the possibility of being drafted and sent to the front.

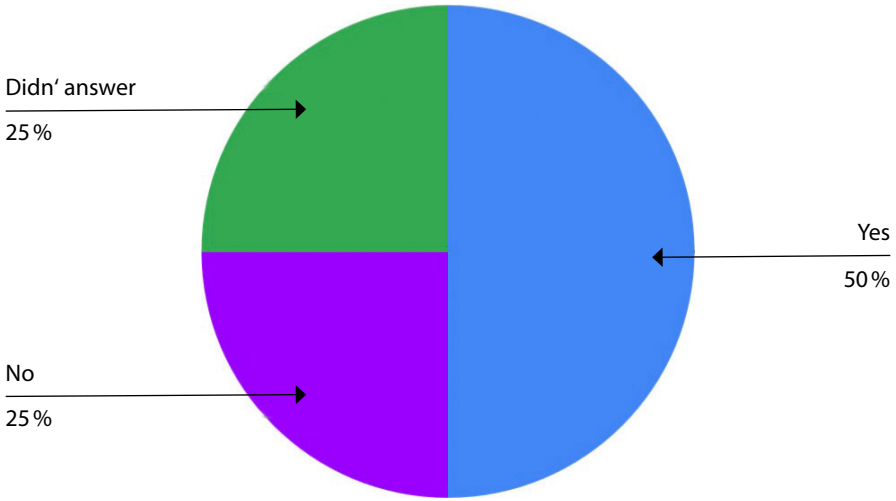

Fig. 5 Do you want more news about the SMO or do you prefer other news?

In general, students' desires to get more real information about the SMO differed markedly from that of their peers in the regions. In remote villages, access to the Internet is limited, and villagers get most of their information from television and other media controlled by the authorities. This source of information contains the standard array of patriotic propaganda, along with enticing advertisements about cash bonuses for participation in the SMO. Access to alternative sources of information to the state-controlled media outlets explains why there are virtually no student "volunteers" who have signed contracts to participate in the SMO (see below). At least, I personally know of no such cases. Thus, Indigenous students seem to have a more accurate perception of the essence and consequences of participating in the SMO than do their relatives back home. They want to know the truth about the operation, they do not support it, or at least they do not want to participate in the war. To confirm or deny these assertions, the next question clarified the previous one.

The opinions of the survey participants were divided in the same proportions as in the previous responses, which indicated the consistency of students' opinions. Some students asserted that they voluntarily participated in discussions and watched news about the SMO. Their motivation was the desire to know as much as possible about what was happening in Ukraine. They also indicated that the official information provided in the media did not reflect the full picture, but they were sure that even

propaganda narratives included some real facts. Other interviewees stated "skewed" information about the SMO was forced on them. They argued that attending lectures about the SMO has been compulsory for everyone. Interviewees also indicated that such coercion caused anxiety and tension. One student simply did not answer this question, most likely out of fear of harassment. I know of cases where students who did not attend "preventive" lectures have been placed on a 'special' list. Then the dean's office requires the "violators" to explain their absence from the lecture in writing. In fact, these documents constitute written evidence of the student's unreliability and can be included in the materials for expulsion from the university or for criminal proceedings under the article "of sharing fake news" about the Russian Armed Forces.

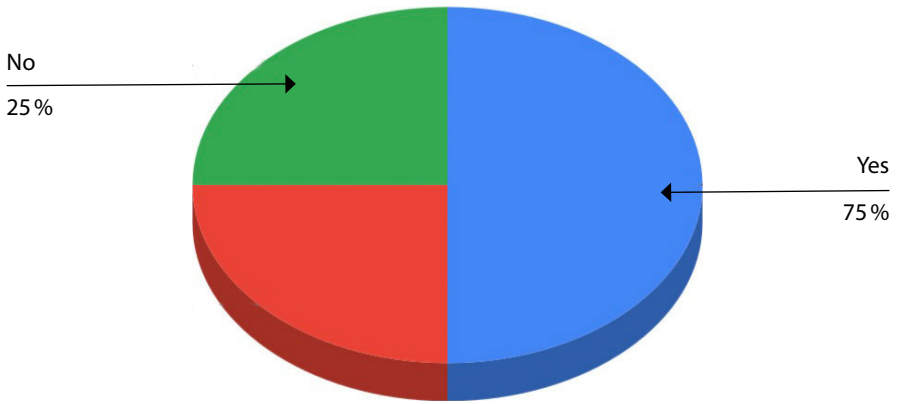

Fig. 6 Are you voluntarily interested in news about SMOs and do you voluntarily participate in discussions about them?

My final question ("Do you want the SMO to continue or should it be discontinued?") was perhaps unnecessarily risky in its consequences for the students, because a direct response would unambigously indicate the students' attitudes towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I assumed that during the interview trust between me and my interlocutors would be maintained. I could see that my interviewees understood that I was not going to publish their personal information. However, half of the interviewees refused to answer the final question.

Although the diagram indicates that students' opinions are divided, I am inclined to conclude that all (or most?) students would like the SMO to end. My opinion is based on the fact that if those interview participants who did not answer this question wanted to continue with the SMO, they would not have to fear persecution by the authorities and could simply state that the SMO should be continued. Those survey participants who answered this question did not hesitate to say that Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine should be terminated. Thus, the answers to my final question indicate that the Indigenous student representatives who agreed to answer

my questions would like to see an end to the SMO. This does not mean that they are opponents of the current political system in Russia. If we remove the negative context of this answer, even those Russians who publicly support the "denazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine would like to see an end to the SMO as soon as possible.

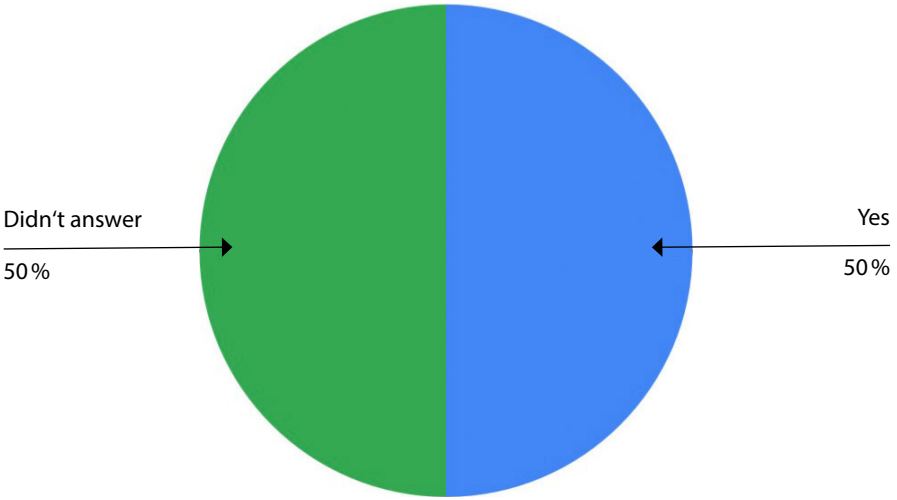

Fig. 7 Did you want the SMO to continue or should it be discontinued?

University, the SMO, and students

As already noted, very few students agreed to answer my questions, although I had what seemed to me a trusting relationship with most of them. The students' reticence was a natural reaction in an environment where it is now a crime to even say the word 'war' in public. In fact, this danger did not appear immediately. In the first month of the SMO in 2022, many students participated in anti-war rallies (Figs. 8–10), at which the first arrests took place. Out of inertia, some students assumed that Russia was a state based on the rule of law and continued to go to protest events. Mass detentions, threats, expulsions from universities, and criminal cases caused a complete halt in protest activity. In those days, students faced the choice of either resigning from the University, skipping any protest action or going into hiding.

Today, students are required to attend all extracurricular events at the university organized by the university administration or patriotic student organizations to support the SMO. At these events, professors normally give propaganda lectures where the justification for Russia's invasion of Ukraine is supported by sometimes contradictory statements. In particular, it has been commonly claimed that Ukraine was a quasi-state, a "gift" to the residents of Ukraine by (Vladimir) Lenin and was in fact

always a "part of Russia." In justifying the Special Military Operation in Ukraine, the university administration openly worked to ensure student support for the SMO.

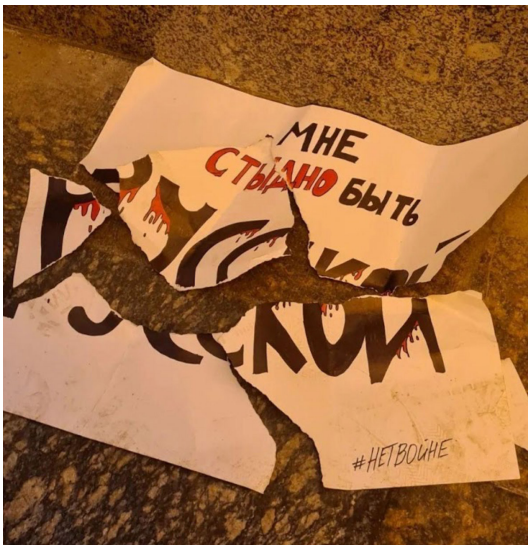

Fig. 8 A torn poster from the protest site in St. Petersburg. "I'm ashamed to be Russian." February 2022.

Fig. 9 Protesting youth on Gostiny Dvor square in St. Petersburg. February 2022.

Fig. 10 Protesters in the square waving to those arrested on buses. February 2022.

Students who publicly objected to this argument were blacklisted. Blacklisting students who did not support the SMO, encouraging whistleblowing, and participating in patriotic actions was a typical set of defensive measures organized by the university administration. The university faculty and administration and community organizations searched for potential SMO protesters. They reviewed publications on social networks in search of conversations disapproving the authorities' actions. Any identified publications were subject to investigation and the publication was forcibly removed. The university authorities warned students that they would be expelled for opinions that did not coincide with the propaganda formulas and even handed over documents to the police to initiate criminal proceedings.

It should be underscored that the threats from the university authorities were real. Students reported that they were detained at rallies "Against the War in Ukraine" in 2022 and taken to the police. As a rule, the next day there were court hearings, at which they were fined or detained for up to 15 days. At the police stations students were intimidated. They were told that the protesters were "enemies of the people," that President Putin supported the actions of the police, and that the police could do whatever they wanted with the detainees. Police officers abused the detainees and withheld food and water. The detainment cells at police stations were overcrowded; detainees had nowhere to sleep. Deliveries of food, water and clothes were not accepted, and lawyers from the human rights organization OVD-INFO (2023 a)[1] were not allowed to visit the detainees. In those early days of the SMO, in February and March 2022, many protesters were beaten during detention: some had their ribs broken, and ambulances were not called until hours later. Authorities used social media to identify active protesters. Special officers trawled social media for protest posts, and linked these with account holders. Police would then send a request to the University about the identified protesting students. The most active protesting students were issued an "Official warning (caution) on the inadmissibility of actions that create conditions for committing offenses or the inadmissibility of continuing anti-social behavior" (Consultant.ru 2021).

For some students, participation in rallies and protest actions resulted not just in expulsion from the university, but in real prison terms. Mediazona (2023) described the story of Dmitry Ivanov, a student at Moscow State University, who was sentenced to eight years in prison for "lies about the Russian army." In fact, the Russian justice system repeatedly violated the fundamental Article No. 29 of the Russian Constitution ("Everyone is guaranteed freedom of thought and speech"). In another case, Gleb Verdiian, a student at Astrakhan State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering, was sentenced to six years in prison for "preparations for high treason" (BBC News Russian Service 2023 a). The threats of criminal prosecution were so real that many students were forced to either remain silent or leave their university and even the country.

1 OVD-Info is a Russian non-governmental organization that focuses on the right to freedom of assembly and opposes the persecution of those who are criminalized for exercising this right.

In such a situation, silence in response to the online interview questions about SMO is fully justified. Therefore, I am especially grateful to those survey participants who, despite the potential danger, agreed to answer my questions. Student reticence is an indicator that students in Russia nowadays live in an atmosphere of distrust and even fear of their classmates, peers, professors, and university authorities. Some students become withdrawn, and their studies and social activities become an excessive burden for them. The psychological trauma caused by such an atmosphere devalues the very desire to get a university education. I do not exclude that the continuation of the current situation will contribute to reducting students' desire to study and subsequently, to the loss of their places at the university.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a brutal war that already killed thousands, disabled tens of thousands, and traumatized millions for life (BBC News Russian Service 2023 b). Russian authorities have labeled the invasion by the Russian armed forces into the territory of the sovereign state of Ukraine as a Special Military Operation (SMO). In using this term, the Russian authorities probably realized that war was not something that the Russian people would support. It is commonly believed that the Russian authorities have popular support for the SMO. My small survey of university students in St. Petersburg casts doubts on whether this sector of Russians support the SMO. Yes, many students are currently doing nothing to stop the killing of thousands of people. But similar to Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the 1930s and 1940s, it impossible to imagine public protests, since a public protest in Russia can lead to a prison sentence. However a prosperous modern state is a society based on the rule of law, designed to ensure equal rights for the social well-being of its citizens.

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Figures

1 Has the Special Military Operation affected your academic plans?
2 Have new problems appeared at work, in studies, with housing? Any other problems?
3 Have new opportunities appeared at work, in studies, with housing? Any others?
4 Do you find yourself often discussing news about SMOs?
5 Do you want more news about the SMO or do you prefer other news?
6 Are you voluntarily interested in news about SMOs and do you voluntarily participate in discussions about them?
7 Did you want the SMO to continue or should it be discontinued?
8 A torn poster from the protest site in St. Petersburg, February 2022. Photo: M. Zdor 2022.
9 Protesting youth on Gostiny Dvor square in St. Petersburg, February 2022. Photo: M. Zdor 2022.
10 Protesters in the square waving to those arrested on buses. February 2022. Photo: M. Zdor 2022.