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12 A TURN OF NO RETURN: RUSSIA'S TERROR IN UKRAINE AND OUR LIVES AS BERING STRAIT ETHNOGRAPHERS

Sveta Yamin-Pasternak and Igor Pasternak

23 February 2022, Fairbanks, Alaska, USA

In the early evening on 23 February 2022, each of us logged on to our Facebook feed for a few minutes of pleasure-scrolling before the start of Ethnomycology class, one of the courses that we team-teach for the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). Igor was the first to stop breathing:

> Kharkov is under attack! Kiev is under attack![1]
> Wait, what?! Says who?! Who is posting???

Sveta squealed as she scrolled through her feed, as her final morsel of hope had faded, giving way to panic and nausea.

We both experienced a momentary paralysis and blackout. Coming to, we sent quick messages to our loved ones in Odesa. We had no information yet on what was happening there, it was still nighttime for them, way earlier than we normally connect. We started class with an apology, explaining to students that we must keep our phones on and pay attention to message notifications, which may turn out to be disruptive.

Just a Russia's length away

We love Odesa and go there often. The time of writing – late 2023 – is one of a prolonged sadness, because for way too long we have not been able to go back. Besides the deep personal ties, as ethnographers we have traveled all around Ukraine (Yamin-Pasternak and Pasternak 2023). Our research in Ukraine is connected to our longtime work in Chukotka, which throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods has been home to thousands of Ukrainians, and in Alaska, which since 1990s is home to an ever-growing number of transnational Ukrainian families. So, when the news comes of the train station massacre in Kramatorsk (8 April 2022), or when Izium (15 September 2022) was liberated after five months of Russian occupation, leaving behind a cluster of recently

1 Both Russian and Ukrainian placenames are featured in this chapter. When translating a quote by someone speaking or writing in Russian or in Ukrainian, we use the English version of the Russian or of the Ukrainian placename spelling, respectively. Everywhere else we use the English version of the Ukrainian spelling.

made mass graves, many bodies mutilated and showing signs of torture, alongside devastation we also find ourselves overcome by memories of lived experiences.

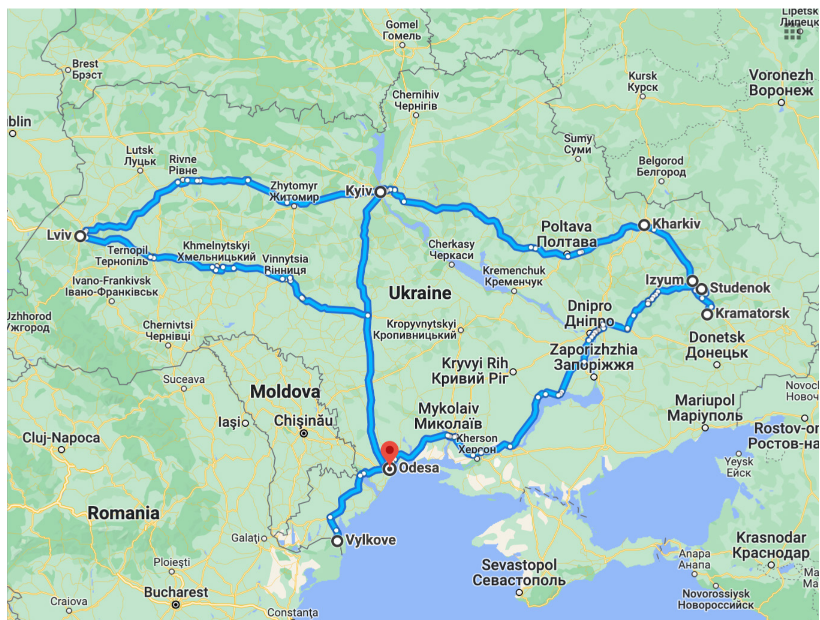

Fig. 1 Routes and destinations in Ukraine that are part of the authors' experience as travelers and researchers.

In early summer 2004 we were treated to a scrumptious and enlightening stay at the home of a retired couple, both former teachers, living out their "Ukrainian dream." They had dedicated their working lives to Chukotka and were now savoring a tranquil but active elderhood, tending to the orchard and garden adjacent to their home in Studenok, one of the area villages for which the town of Kramatorsk is the administrative hub. They were remembered fondly by many Chukotkans, who thought it would be greatly enjoyable by both the hosts and the guests if we were able to visit these folks.

In the late 1980s, our Studenok hosts sold the apartment in Kramatorsk (their birthplace) they had earned through the Soviet system of incentives for the citizens who retained long-term job assignments in the North. "Charmed by this place," said Anatoly Borisovich, "[as a young person] I fantasized of buying a small house and spending my retirement here. For twenty-eight years I carried this dream…" The couple's decision to work in Chukotka was largely influenced by close friends who, they recalled, said that doing so would be chance to earn high pensions and "see the world." Their first assignment was in Enmelen – a Chukchi village on the south-

Fig. 2 Gray whale vertebrae in the yard. Studenok, Ukraine.

ern coast of the Chukchi Peninsula. They later moved to the neighboring Nunligran, also a Chukchi village, and finally to the Yupik village of Novoe Chaplino, where they remained until 1989. During our stay in the small cabin they had built, in great part for the purpose of hosting friends from Chukotka who chose Studenok as their vacation destination, our hosts would take turns pointing to the assemblages of Chukotka art and objects in and around their home (Fig. 2). The feelings of connectedness ignited by those objects were complexly disorienting. Not every yard in rural Ukraine has a gray whale vertebra embedded within the décor! We were very much at home with the surrounding rural idyll: we have traveled around Ukraine quite a bit, mostly by trains, and Sveta is originally from the region in southeast Belarus just to the north across the Ukraine-Belarus border (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Igor with Anatoly Borisovich and Yelena Aleksandrovna, our Studenok hosts, Chukotkan-Ukrainian retirees in the garden.

Remarkably, so were the whale bones, seal skin collages, ivory art, and other objects, which the couple apparently needed, to make the home for which they had labored over many years in the distant and, for them, stubbornly “unhomy” Chukotka exactly that: a home.

Shortly after we said farewell to our Chukotkan-Ukrainian friends, we found ourselves at the main railway station in Kramatorsk, which in April 2022 the Russian troops covered with the bodies of killed and wounded civilians. Continuing out of Kramatorsk in the direction of Kharkiv, we soon realized that more time on the ground would be necessary enroute to our destination. As the train was moving through pine forests, making short routine stops on the way to the town of Izium, more and more mushroom pickers hauling buckets of freshly collected bounty crowded onto the train. Because ethnomycology is one of the longtime foci in our research (Yamin-Pasternak and Pasternak 2018), we chatted with as many train riders as were willing to tell us about their current and past mushroom hunts. We got off the train just outside Izium to a sight of a field buyer weighing mushrooms to calculate the amount owed to a picker expecting cash for her harvest. Other pickers were lining up, buckets of mushrooms weighing their arms down. Walking across the tracks near Izium we spotted a man with a fantastically full bag of chanterelles, Sveta’s favorite from her childhood in Belarus (Yamin-Pasternak 2007). We were thrilled when he accepted our offer to sell to us rather than to the buyer.

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine – twenty-two months at the time of writing – the calls with our loved ones to the sound of explosions at their end have become noxiously countless and common. In stark contrast to the zombifying perplexity of the dreadful spring of 2022, at the time of writing the protocol that our loved ones follow is largely thus: if a missile falls and the damage is not more than a busted window and minor injuries from flying glass, the wounds on both [the human and the window] get bandaged and everyone carries on. Our calls no longer focus exclusively on the war: we are close people, always with myriad stories to tell each other. Nevertheless, the warning sirens, air attacks, firsthand accounts from the front by friends and acquaintances, and other reminders that it is wartime come nightly and daily, and everyone in Ukraine who is lucky to be alive knows others who no longer are, directly as the result of the war. All of us know others who have been severely disabled, displaced, widowed, and orphaned. The Odesa Transfiguration Cathedral, greatly damaged during Russia’s bombing in July 2023, is within less than two hundred meters from the building that was home to four generations of Igor’s family. Igor’s great-grandfather was the original owner of the family apartment in the center of the legendary multicultural city, an exceptional place for being a metropolis where the Pale of Settlement Jews were allowed to live (King 2012; Richardson 2008; Zipperstein 1991). The Odesa National Art Museum, damaged in the bombing in early November 2023, is just down the street from the building where we lived for part of the summer twenty years prior.

That is the geography of our lives since the dreadful night of Russia's full-scale invasion: a bombed cathedral just down the block from Igor's old apartment, mass graves with mutilated bodies of brutally murdered Ukrainians a short walk from where we once bought Sveta's nostalgically desired chanterelles, a piece of an intercepted rocket that fell only steps from the doorway of our loved ones' dacha, and the loved ones whom we are so fortunate to continue to see and hear through internet calls. All too frequently we talk to the sound of sirens or explosions, at times in tears and mostly in radically sincere and deliberate joy over the fact that, whatever the means, whatever the circumstances, we do get to have them with us, here the forest outside of Fairbanks, Alaska, as we like to say "just a Russia's length away."

A turn of no return

We love the Bering Strait.

> When I am anywhere around the Bering Strait, islands or mainland, Russia or Alaska, I cannot walk, I frolic in bliss like a reindeer on a mushroom-rich tundra. I love this part of the world! I feel so blessed and privileged to be a Bering Strait ethnographer. Ethnographic research is many things, but first and foremost it's a relationship. Thank you for our relationship, dear beautiful beloved Bering Strait…

Such reads Sveta's Facebook post from 15 December 2015, written on landing in Nome, Alaska, on a return flight from another dreamy stay in the Inupiaq community of Shishmaref. For two weeks prior, we lived with our Shishmaref family, one of the many in the Bering Strait region that also treat us as such. Most days we helped butcher caribou. We are also caribou hunters (and fishers and foragers at-large) and part of our ethnographic learning from culture bearers is also a knowledge exchange. And we take pleasures in doing household chores, like harvesting blocks of freshwater ice from a nearby lake, to melt for drinking and multi-use water. In Alaska-speak we too are "dry cabin dwellers" (where "dry" means no plumbing). But our main interest during that visit was in the aged walrus that we helped put in the ground in May of that year. Hopeful that the fermentation enzymes did their work, our host family was waiting for the right weather (when the temperatures are sufficiently cold, as a measure of food safety in the products made by traditional methods of fermentation). Knowing the long-awaited fragrant delicacy was to be unearthed, we wanted to be in Shishmaref to help chisel the frozen ground and maximally document and learn about the entire process.

At the time of its end as truly transcontinental Beringian ethnographic research our work in the Bering Strait was near quarter-century old. What we mean by "truly transcontinental Beringian ethnographic research" is conducting in-person on-the-ground ethnographic fieldwork that engages communities on both Chukotkan and

knom
RADIO MISSION

Native Food Traditions, New and Old

By Katie Kazmierski | August 1, 2019 | 0

A NEW MULTIMEDIA EXHIBIT at the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum until October showcases traditional native foods and the ways they are prepared throughout the Bering Strait region.

Fig. 4 Images related to exhibition *Aging with Change: Food Arts in the Bering Strait* featured in the article by Katie Kazmierski (2019), Nome Radio Mission.

Alaskan sides of the Bering Strait (Fig. 4). Living in Fairbanks, Chukotka was/is never too far away. The official business that over the years has taken us to over a dozen Chukotkan communities and seasonal subsistence camps included dissertation research that merged Soviet-era history and ethnomycology (Yamin-Pasternak 2007), longstanding interest in aesthetics, expressive culture, and ivory art (Pasternak 2021), our joint interests across the topics of knowledge, infrastructure, and customs connected with water (Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2017), practices of Indigenous cuisines and environmental health (Dudarev et al. 2019 a,b), food arts (Pasternak 2018), and multisensory experiences of the foods prepared by traditional means of aging and fermentation (Yamin-Pasternak and Pasternak 2021; Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2014). We also traveled to participate in conferences and helped organize travel and activities for Chukotkan-Alaskan youth exchanges.

Over many years, we and Chukotka were part of a shared and uniquely entangled network. A network where young men who were named our godsons or nephews could ask for a suit to wear to a school graduation ball. Fellow hunters and fishers felt comfortable giving us shopping lists of gear items and boat and snowmachine [snowmobile] parts, and elders would request that Alaska's famous "pilot bread" and denture adhesives be sent across the Strait in the same bundle. Chukotka-based colleagues would take care to send books and newspaper copies they thought we would enjoy, and anyone of us, from either side, even long before the age of social media and

mobile telecommunication, could find a way to get in touch and relate that so-and-so from there-and-there would be arriving in Nome or Provideniia, and could use help, and would appreciate hospitality.

To whatever extent we explicitly study kinship as part of our research, we definitely live it. Even though we were not from the communities that became our field sites, over time, as the culture bearers with whom we grew close became our siblings, we treated their parents as our elders, their children became our nieces and nephews, and some of their grandkids were and still are our godchildren. For us the Bering Strait kinship spans the territories of Russia and the US, where people of Yupik, Chukchi, and Inupiaq cultures are connected through a long history of both ancestry and social relations. We connected not only during an official project-based fieldwork or through the transfers of cargo and sharing of news. When an Alaskan Bering Strait community would be hosting large groups of visitors from Chukotka as part of a cultural exchange, we would get a call from one of our close families in Gambell, Savoonga, or Nome, asking if we were available to come help with cooking. In formal and informal capacities, we volunteered for various exchange programs, assisting with organizing activities and with Russian-English translation. At the time of writing, we are continuing our ongoing research in Alaska and have retained our family-like relations on the US side of the Bering Strait. But our enthralling life as true trans-Beringian ethnographers is no more. Prior to 24 February 2022, even in the face of the Russia's abhorrent annexation of Crimea, the ever-tightening grip on human freedoms, and the growing administrative bureaucracy that was constantly adding to the precarity of being an ethnographer in this part of the world, we had never envisioned a life where we would not be planning our next return to Chukotka.

The "turn of no return" is how we have come to regard the state of our work in Russia. This turn is not a side effect of the US sanctions that bar federal agencies from funding our field research on the Chukotkan side of the Bering Strait. It is the tragedy of the reality where our nephews and godsons have gone to Ukraine to become the tormentors and killers of our loved ones, many joining voluntarily and all, as far as we can tell, with the adamant support of their families (our adopted families!).

In a last exchange with a very close Chukotkan friend we sent a few messages back-and-forth, discussing the possibility of getting some snowmachine parts ordered for someone else. Our communication was habitually nonchalant, pragmatic, affectionate, and like all the ones before it, meant to be continued. That was on 15 February 2022. The next time we got a glimpse of this friend was in video recorded outside the Chukotka Heritage Museum in Anadyr, the capital of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug. Displayed on the façade of the building was a large Ribbon of St. George (*georgievskaia lenta*), Russia's military symbol in the shape of the Z-symbol, widely adopted by the government and citizens of the Russian Federation to communicate support for Putin and the war they call "special military operation." The front steps of the museum served as the staging area. From the steps down into the city square, des-

cended rows of marchers, some wearing Indigenous regalia and carrying hand drums to the beat of which the entire collective chanted: "We are Russians, our country is Russia, Putin is our President."

For those who know the context, the scene was clear: the call to identify as a 'Russian,' regardless of one's ancestry, native language, and cultural affiliation has been in the center of Russia's nationalist propaganda campaign. It is common for state employees in Russia (teachers, cultural workers including state-sponsored dance groups, media officials, individuals working across numerous government sectors) to be instructed to participate in such choreographed propaganda events. "Z-flash mobs" such as the one we describe have been flooding social media, each one featuring performers in the traditional regalia of the Indigenous people of a specific region, with the unifying message being that, regardless of one's ancestral origin, everyone living in Russia is Russian (*Russkii*, as opposed to a Russian citizen – *Rossiianin*), and Putin reigns over all. We understand the social and political landscape that gives root, air, and nutrients to such content. Yet, recognizing people we used to love among the propagandists or actors of the regime, directly responsible for the immense losses and for the sufferings of our loved ones in Ukraine, is a wound the size of a profound heartbreak.

"NATO," "Nazis," and "tricks"

The Anadyr flash mob is but one entry in our ever-growing archive of photos, videos, and stories from social media and online news outlets, where people we have known as fiercely self-reliant, competent, and critically (and cynically) minded about Russia's authoritarian regime, are now repeating the claptrap broadcasted on Russian television that has no recognizable grounding in any lived reality. As in other parts of Russia, two concerns are commonly voiced by those in Chukotka who (at least publicly) have embraced the Kremlin line on Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. The first one is concerns about "naziki," a Russian slang diminutive of "nazis," referencing one of Russia's deadliest lies, that Ukraine had been overtaken by "nazis" or "Ukro-fascists" who were oppressing the good Russian-speaking people. The latter, thus, were in dire need of Russia's liberation and protection.

The second concern of those supporting the "special military operation" has been the saddest for us to see taking root in Chukotka, especially among the Indigenous men. For the maritime hunters of whales, seals, and walrus, their daily work takes place in Russia's territorial waters of the Bering and Chukchi seas. The maritime Bering Strait is the space that Chukotka shares with Alaska and one that Russia shares with the United States. It is not uncommon for the Chukotkan hunters to meet their counterparts from St. Lawrence Island and, on a calm day, exchange salutations between the "Russian" and "American" hunting boats. Now, in solemn seriousness, Indigenous hunters from

the Chukotkan side of the Bering Strait say that they must go fight in Ukraine "to protect Russia from having NATO come to its borders." Within just weeks following the invasion, respected Indigenous hunters in Chukotkan communities began to paint "Z" on their boats and large groups of children and adults were lining up to form human Zs at community rallies in support of the war. This was continuing at the time of writing as was the weaving of camouflage netting by Indigenous women, who are widely upheld as master seamstresses of traditional skin sewing. Although it is possible to view such actions merely as an act of volunteering and support for one's country's military, both in their own social media and in the stories reported in the state-controlled news broadcasts the seamstresses repeatedly emphasize that they do this work to help Russia succeed in their fight against NATO and/or "nazis" in Ukraine. More than a few times since the start of the war, we have seen families posing for farewell photos with the sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers leaving to go fight in Ukraine. It is not just that some of these families are very dear to us: for years or decades we have known them as remarkably tight-knit inseparable social units that would hardly be caught in an outing where every single kin member is not present.

Here too we are not entirely dumfounded. Part of our combined expertise is in the visual discourse of propaganda art and, specifically in Russia, its effectiveness in erecting the cult of patriotic death, where a life well-lived is a life sacrificed in the name of one's country (Pasternak 2023). Anthropology offers tools to help grasp the potential for social mobility for Indigenous men whose standing in society, vastly compromised by endemic economic inequity, marginalization, and racism, has no other means of achieving an advancement that is anywhere near as rapid and prodigious as the prospect of becoming a war hero. And in the social-cultural milieu that has been cultivated around Russia's "special military operation," "becoming a hero" overcomes the possibility of getting killed, severely injured, or returning home permanently scarred by the trauma – a common fallout from what some of Russia's fighters have done while in Ukraine.

Some of the consequences for the small Chukotkan Indigenous communities are devastating. As in other regions of Russia, some Chukotkans who have returned to their home villages have firsthand carried out execution, torture, and rape of civilians in the towns and villages under the Russian occupation. The insight related by Indigenous Yupik and Chukchi scholars, who have engaged primary sources in their home communities (Kinok 2023; Zdor 2023), offers a critically important understanding into the complex intersectionality that gives rise to the motivations of Indigenous hunters, fishers, and reindeer herders to leave their beloved places to go to war.

In the letters we have exchanged with the Chukotkan friends who want to continue keeping in touch, we have received updates of who, in a specific village *uekhal voevat* [went to fight]. Sometimes we receive updates on who has returned and who perished. Amidst the unabashed patriotism and verbatim propaganda from Russia's television, we hear nuance, suspicion, and fluidity in how at least some Chukotkans weigh the

pros and cons of joining the "special military operation." Despite it being a criminal offense punishable by a long prison sentence in Russia, at least some people in Chukotka call it "war." Below is an excerpt from a letter we received in summer 2023:

> [Name of the person] went to go fight. And several others from our village are getting ready. Everyone is waiting for the war to end. No one wants to send their men there. There is a promise of a large payment, but they [the authorities] also run their own tricks. The very first mother from our village who was the first to bury her son received 12 million rubles (around 130K USD), bought an apartment in Anadyr, and, people say, drank away the rest. Apartments in Anadyr these days cost over 8 million rubles.

In the same letter this friend also related that the local hunting collective was struggling (shortage of fuel, supplies needed to maintain boats and hunting equipment), that the village has been promised new housing units in a near future, and that it has become possible for more of the village residents to finance large purchases, such as automobiles, ATVs, and apartments, but the bank loans were very hard to pay back. Others were angry at the authorities for allowing what they have come to regard as a scam on behalf of the lender. Ultimately, whoever is found to be at fault, the financial incentives of volunteering or sending a family member to go fight in Ukraine is pragmatically considered as a way out, despite the evidence of irregularities on who receives compensation and in what amounts a circumstance which the letter we quote calls "tricks."

"Ukraine is not in the Arctic. Why politicize our field?"

For one full year, our experience in the Arctic research community has been a near-total radio silence. We are referring to the scholarly and academic voices of researchers and professional organizations, not to the life-saving humanitarian involvement by individuals in the Arctic research community, which we gratefully recognize in the final section. A notable exception was the *Introduction* to the special issue on Chukotka of the journal *Études Inuit Studies* (Oparin and Vaté 2021 [the actual publication of this issue was postponed to mid-2022 and the introduction was written after the invasion]). Another exception, and an excellent entry in the *Arctic Yearbook 2022* – relating the predicament of Indigenous artists who fled from Russia (Huhmarniemi and Sharova 2022). At conferences, the closest we have witnessed was a panel at the 2022 Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, where high-profile agency officials offered their takes on whether "operational co-existence" with entities in Russia could "still be possible" (Wilson Center Polar Institute and Baker Arctic Consulting 2022).

Overwhelmingly, the core rationale at the formal venues and in most collegiate interactions is that because Ukraine "is not in the Arctic," any mention of the war other

than as an obstacle to the continuation of research and cooperation is unwarranted politization of our field. We gratefully recognize the handful of colleagues with whom, early on, we felt to be on the same page. Together, we were coming away with a sense of there being an ambient hope that "the conflict," as many called Russia's war in and against Ukraine, could and should be waited out. Then, when restrictions (by governments, funding agencies, etc.) are lifted, researchers in and outside Russia can pick up where they (we) have left off when the circumstances surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine forcibly interrupted our ongoing work and future plans.

Fig. 5 Sveta with Olga Yakuba of Odesa, Ukraine, the project lead on the mural *Our Love is as Big as a Whale*, painted by a group of Ukrainian refugees with the participation of Odesa's Studio Peach and President of Iceland, Guðni Thorlacius Jóhannesson.

We understand, from the news stories and from direct interaction in Alaska and in Iceland (Fig. 5), that the Circumpolar North is quickly becoming home to scores of Ukrainian refugees, while the military mobilization in Russia of both draftees and those who enlist voluntarily is impacting Arctic communities. The impacts extend beyond the individuals suffering over an absent family member who has gone to war. In Chukotka and elsewhere, the enlisted Indigenous men are part of the human capital, whose roles as knowledge bearers and providers are critical not only for the households they help sustain, but for the entire communities. This is especially true for small villages, where social structure, food security, spirituality, and life itself depends on hunting large marine mammals, an enterprise that cannot exist without collaboration between strong, knowledgeable, and competent men.

In the words of Sidney Mintz, in this context "not everybody laments the losses as losses but welcomes them as gains" (2006: 7). Yet, the losses were/are colossal and grief from the tragedy of those losses is felt not only in the home communities of those lost in war, and not just in Russia. The Yupik villages on St. Lawrence Island, and to an extent all Inuit world, regard the death of every Chukotka Yupik as a death of one of their own.

With a growing number of Russian citizens who had to flee Russia and are forced into a long-term or permanent exile, Indigenous Russia is now effectively everywhere: in Georgia, the non-Circumpolar countries of EU, in the "Lower 48" United States, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Thailand, and in so many other places (see Takakura et al., *this volume – eds.*). A growing body of Russia's media tales were asserting parallels between Ukraine and Alaska as the two locations that are adjacent to the current territory of Russia, each being an involuntary home to the residents who are Russian at heart, longing for their homelands and Russia to become one.

Fig. 6 Igor and Babushka Lida, one of our many teachers in the arts of produce farming in Delta Junction, Alaska, home of the growing ex-Soviet immigrant community. Like many transnational migrants, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Babushka Lida spent part of her year helping tend to the fruit orchards in Vinnitsa, Ukraine, that belong to her extended family.

These circumstances prompted us to organize the session, "Alaskan and Arctic Anthropology since Russia's Invasion of Ukraine" at the 2023 conference of the Alaska Anthropological Association. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first conference session in the Arctic research community dedicated to this topic. Several contributors to the session offered analyses of the verbal and visual discourse around indigeneity, national identity, and social and human values emerging in connection with Russia's war in Ukraine (Arzyutov and Peemot 2023; Fritz 2023; Pasternak 2023). As a discussant, Anna Kerttula de Echave shared her experiences during the time she

lived in Chukotka in the last years of the Soviet Union, when it was home to a large number of Ukrainians (Kerttula 2000).

Our presentation in the session shared stories of the families from the growing community of ex-Soviet immigrants in Alaska of whom many are from Ukraine (Yamin-Pasternak and Pasternak 2023). Ten to twelve years prior, we carried out an ethnographic fieldwork and completed a collaborative exhibition with one such Alaskan community, Delta Junction, focusing on the subsistence horticulture that is central to their adaptation in rural sub-Arctic Alaska (Pasternak et al. 2014) (Fig. 6).

We remain connected with several families living near there. One of the first fundraisers we organized was for the relatives of our Delta Junction friend, a large multi-generational household in a village near Kherson that had lost their home during a Russian airstrike shortly after the invasion. After several months of living in the basement, rationing the food supplies, this family had to run for their lives because the soldiers representing Russian occupational forces started to enter what remained of people's homes, indiscriminately shooting everyone in sight.

As mentors, we particularly benefited from the part of the presentation by Erica Hill (2023), who shared an overview of the impacts on fieldwork, collaborative ecosystems monitoring, and science diplomacy across the Arctic, recognizing that researchers at all career stages have been affected. She emphasized that graduate students who invested time and effort into gaining language fluency and knowledge to prepare for fieldwork in Russia may be the ones in the research community who are experiencing the most stress, given the sudden lack of opportunities that were at the heart of their interests and aspirations. (see Parlato, *this volume – eds.*)

We were especially humbled by the fact that several exiled Indigenous scholars and intellectuals from Russia joined our panel (Arzyutov and Peemot 2023; Kinok 2023; Zdor 2023). Most of them do not have relations in Ukraine. Yet, these audacious persons chose to speak up for the plight of our loved ones and millions affected by the war, and they continue to do so. Their choice comes at a very high price: they have had to forgo the possibility of returning to the homes, jobs, relatives, communities, and places in the lands they hold dear. In deepest respect for the enormity of their sacrifice, we cannot imagine ever wanting to come to terms with the complicity required to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Chukotka or elsewhere in Russia.

A book review with an "author's note," a put-out hearth, and a broken heart

The blow of the invasion was overwhelming, but when it knocked us off our feet we were certain that our Chukotkan colleagues would be the first to cushion the fall. We did not question for a moment that in turning to them for emotional support in the hours and weeks following the invasion, their first reaction would be to ask about our loved ones in Ukraine and to wish them and all Ukrainians to stay out of harm's

way. And, we thought that as the very next thing, they would curse Putin's invasion with the same rigour that we all have condemned other of his actions over the past twenty-plus years, over countless cups of tea shared during numerous bilateral visits. We were certain (in the days following the invasion) that, no matter what, we would remain close and connected and, in one way or another, would continue our mutually appreciated work.

We were not entirely wrong: some relationships remain strong to this day. The number of these enduring ties is painfully small by comparison to our pre-war network. In their everyday lives, our friends in Russia who want to stay in touch and continue having candid conversations are extremely lonely and isolated. We now treasure being present in each other's lives all the more. It is not lost on all of us that keeping a genuine connection with contacts abroad for most Russian citizens presents some degree of risk. In that light, the fact that some of our former friends in Chukotka started ghosting us immediately following the invasion is not incomprehensible. That others have emerged as propagandists of the war, agitating Chukotkan families to send their men to go fight in Ukraine, is heartbreaking.

Our last output as transcontinental Beringian ethnographers was the book review of a volume dedicated to the 125th anniversary of N. L. Gondatti's *Trip to the Chukchi Peninsula* in 1895 for *Sibirica* (Yamin-Pasternak 2023). Reflecting the authentically heartening effect of the book, the review took the opportunity to recognize one of its co-editors, Igor Krupnik, as a longtime keeper of the Chukotka-Alaska's shared intellectual hearth.

The review was written and submitted in the world we had "before the invasion." Adding the following note was the only way we could fathom seeing the review in print in the world that came "after:"

> I requested that this pre-publication note is included with the review, written prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. I condemn the scholars and institutions in Chukotka, and elsewhere in the Russian Federation, who have since emerged as supporters and propagandists of Putin's murderous regime, responsible for the mass-scale suffering in Ukraine, and for the detrimental impact to Russia's indigenous communities where men (hunters, herders, caregivers, providers) are being disproportionately targeted through mobilization and misinformation. *Slava Ukrayini!* (Yamin-Pasternak 2023: 178).

Both of us are grateful for the understanding and support shown by the editorial team of Sibirica in honoring our request to add this critically important note as the journal issue was headed for publication.

The war to some is a loving mother to others

The heading of this section is a Russian proverb that draws on the kinship of two lineages: of those who suffer from the war and of those who benefit and profit from it.

In June 2023, the Association of Anthropologists and Ethnologists of Russia held its 25th Congress in St. Petersburg. A presentation at the plenary session listed preparedness to "conduct anthropological research in the newly acquired regions of Russian Federation" as one of the goals or the present state of anthropological education in Russia. Sixteen months since Russia's invasion of Ukraine a speaker at the meeting of the Association of Anthropologists and Ethnologists of Russia referred to the sites of mass atrocities in the regions that Ukraine regards as being temporarily occupied by Russia as "the newly acquired regions of Russian Federation." Sixteen months into Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, a prominent Russian anthropologist, speaking from a podium on the stage of the glamorous St. Petersburg Tauride Palace, states, as a matter of fact, that ethnographic field research by Russian scholars must get underway in the lands where the war was still going on and which Ukraine was fiercely fighting to regain.

In October 2023, the international conference "Decolonizing Space in the Global East" at the University of Helsinki included a presentation featuring photos and stories from the generously supplied receptions and elaborate entertainment program, that, currently, in the war-time era, the speaker (a university-based scholar) and delegates from the Evenki communities in Russia received when they traveled to China. Showcasing the group's experience under the auspices of the Chinese government, the presenter explained that the connection to the Evenki was also China's connection to the Arctic Council, hence the interest in the Russia-China Evenki exchange. This, as we understood, was offered as a workaround solution on how to continue one's ethnographic engagement with Indigenous people of Russia in the face of the obstacles brought on by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The main stipulation of this arrangement was to not mention the war and to carry on without ever inquiring whether and what feelings the researchers or the participants may have about "the conflict."

The war to some is a loving mother to others.

Empathy, energy, social ties

In the weeks and months following the invasion, some of our loved ones in Ukraine were among the many who were directly assisted by the Siberianists in the Arctic social science community based in Germany and Austria. Back in spring of 2022 the world had much less clarity on how Russia's terror in Ukraine would unfold and which parts of Ukraine would be the next to be subjected to the horrors inflicted on places like Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Mikolaiv, which came under heavy bombardment in the first

days following Russia's invasion. Also, at that time, we did not know whether more of Ukraine would come under Russia's occupation, and if so, which regions would be the next to experience mass calamity. March 2022 was the month when rape, torture, and massacres at the hands of the invaders were raging around Kyiv, in the towns like Bucha and Irpen. The world was learning about the Russian atrocities in Mariupol and Izium, and other places.

Having colleagues directly involved in transporting resources into Ukraine and helping people from Ukraine and Russia get to safety was a lifeforce injection to cope with our personal anguish. These fantastic humans were instantaneously reconfiguring and applying their knowledge of languages, cultures, policy, and networking know-how to truly save lives. They were also not lazy on the legwork, willing to give evening and weekend time to hauling furniture and appliances across several flights of stairs to help set up living space for the new arrivals. At one point, we called them "miracle workers." "No miracle, just empathy, some energy, and social ties. That's what we trained in, right?" was the response.

About a year after the invasion, we were fortunate to make an extraordinary new friend – an Arctic anthropologist from Russia, who was part of the clandestine network of enormously courageous individuals involved in helping kidnapped Ukrainian citizens escape Russia. In some cases, the people in need were large multigenerational groups of extended kin who had recently lived through stress and horror unimaginable to most. Their homes in Ukraine had been destroyed by the Russian invaders; while the story of how they ended up in Russia differed for each family, they all held in common a desperate need for help to get out. Our hearts skip a bit every time we think about the risks – to their safety, jobs, relatives, lives – that people like our Russian friend-colleague were taking, exchanging phone calls and messages while piecing together the different logistical segments and committing their own humble means to purchase clothing, food, and supplies to help these families along the way.

Feeling crushed for the millionth time by the cruelty of Putin's regime, the heartbreakingly complicity of the plenary speakers at the Congress of Anthropologists and Ethnologists of Russia, the suffocatingly disenchanting choices made by our Chukotkan colleagues, the tragedy of our Chukchi and Yupik nephews and godsons taking part in inflicting suffering on our loved ones in Ukraine, we are heartened and humbled by the grace and gift of the Russian colleague with whose story we conclude this telling of ours. Let it remind all of us for whom the understanding of the human experience is at the heart of our purpose in life and work that whatever institution we serve, whatever specialty we claim, and whatever theory we advance: empathy, energy, and social ties is in fact what we trained in.

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Figures

1 Routes and destinations in Ukraine that are part of the authors' experience as travelers and researchers.
2 Gray whale vertebrae in the yard. Studenok, Ukraine. Photo: Igor Pasternak, 2004.
3 Igor with Anatoly Borisovich and Yelena Aleksandrovna, our Studenok hosts, Chukotkan-Ukrainian retirees in the garden. Photo: Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, 2004.
4 Images related to exhibition *Aging with Change: Food Arts in the Bering Strait* featured in the article by Katie Kazmierski (2019), Nome Radio Mission. Presentation slide by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak and Igor Pasternak, 2023.
5 Sveta Yamin-Pasternak with Olga Yakuba of Odesa, Ukraine, the project lead on the mural *Our Love is as Big as a Whale*, painted by a group of Ukrainian refugees with the participation of Odesa's Studio Peach and President of Iceland, Guðni Thorlacius Jóhannesson. Photo: Igor Pasternak, 2022.
6 Igor and Babushka Lida, one of our many teachers in the arts of produce farming in Delta Junction, Alaska, home of the growing ex-Soviet immigrant community. Like many transnational migrants, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Babushka Lida spent part of her year helping tend to the fruit orchards in Vinnitsa, Ukraine, that belong to her extended family. Photo: Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, 2014.