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# 2 A HYBRID RESOLUTION TO ARCTIC RESEARCH DURING THE WAR: SEEKING A MIRACLE

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## Introduction

Losing direct connection with the field is cognitively harsh for an ethnographic researcher. By the 1990s maps of my field sites decorated my office walls. When day-to-day bureaucratic affairs became overwhelmingly tiresome, I looked at these maps and soothed myself with the dream of journeys that I managed to make annually for over three decades.

The history of Estonian northern/Siberian scholarship started in the 19th century, but regular ethnographic field studies began only in the 1970s. Since the early 1990s, I conducted annual fieldwork trips to the Finno-Ugric communities in Western Siberia and the Russian North, among the Khanty, Mansi, Nenets, and Komi people. The last time I saw my field partners was in 2019. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted this ethnographic collaboration; then war in Ukraine put an end to the long and culturally intimate encounters.

My Finno-Ugric field connections were not compromised "suddenly." Conditions for doing field ethnography in Russia have worsened and became more complicated gradually, over several years prior to the COVID-19. Under these new conditions, one needs to continue scholarly work that is both methodologically adequate and ethically appropriate. You cannot abandon your field partners but rather must re-conceptualize and re-arrange the collaboration.

This paper addresses the changed realities of doing research on and among Indigenous peoples of the Russian North and Western Siberia, in the context of dynamic international and national political and ideological environment. War contributes to the uncertainty, as unbiased sources are impossible to find, and data collection across the political and ideological frontline is complicated. Ethnographic fieldwork in such circumstances provides additional emotional challenges. (cf. Wood 2006; Käihkö 2020; Leete 2022). Any topic and contact become sensitive.

Käihkö (2022) claims that ethnographic exploration enables diverse views on the war and that anthropologists can add an ethical dimension to the analysis of war by bringing the human "lenses" to the fore. He proposes facilitating ethnographic articulation of the ambivalence brought by the war, instead of accepting public and international polarization of peoples and nations.

The rupture triggered by the war of 2022 has detached us from our ethnographic field in the North. I propose that cultural intimacy between ethnographers and northern people involved a particular cognitive domain or a "common sociality" (Herzfeld 2016: 7) that becomes particularly significant now. This shared intimacy is composed of supposedly exclusive imageries and actions that generate social cohesion (Povinelli 2002; Jamieson 2011). The question remains how outsiders can comprehend this collective closeness and how much can it be challenged or altered by outside researchers. Can we build up and maintain "intimacy across cultures" (Jamieson 2011: 2) in the current situation? One can still consider cultural intimacy a tool for producing reciprocal understanding (Leete 2020), although this approach has become extremely complicated.

This brings us to another concept related to divergent cross-cultural knowledge production. The issue of "hybridity" involves the standardizing effect of governing political and social agents on individual subjects and minority groups. Their influence creates uncertainty, contradictions, simulation, and makes cultural identity indistinct. But such a directed hybridization may also stimulate hidden processes that empower and diversify the culture and ethos of marginalized groups (Bhabha 1994; Young 1995; Ashcroft et al. 2007). Hybridity is created on the frontiers and enables production of novelty (Bhabha 1994). Cultural boundaries have become more distinct during the war, and we all are in the process of creating new types of knowledge and modes of comprehension, although we cannot tell for sure what the effect of this war-related cultural hybridity eventually will be.

Being a regular traveler to the Indigenous North for nearly three decades, I became accustomed and even addicted to the field. At the same time, I started to feel slightly like "a fish attempting to see the water" (Ginkel 1998: 257). Friends and colleagues in Estonia sometimes asked what was "special" about Siberia (hardly anybody believes that the Komi Republic is not part of Siberia). As the time passed, I increasingly tried to downplay this assusumption by answering: "Nothing," and that everything was fine and "ordinary" in the Russian North, just as at home.

When discussing the "anthropology at home" methodological approach, Strathern (1987) claims that closeness blurs conceptual differences. This can relate to moving from data collection to the analytical phase of scholarly comprehension. But if we are to focus more on the ethnographer's field experience, this cognitive coherence also appears useful when we do research from a distance. The distance between us and our ethnographic field makes comprehension blurred.

I realize that the North is not my "genuine" home. But it was always like my "second home," indeed an ideal one where I had no real troubles. Sure, some mundane confrontations with the law enforcement officers and other officials did happen sporadically. I have been temporarily detained a few times and interrogated, even with machine guns pointed at me by members of special police forces, fined for not-committed legal violations, and expelled from one area without real legal basis. As an

Estonian, one appears "guilty" in various things in Russia, such as the expansion of NATO, the demolition of monuments to Lenin and the Great Patriotic War (not only in Estonia, but in Ukraine as well), and, most importantly, the very fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. But these and other unpleasant encounters did not appear to be "'too serious," just humorous episodes of travel. The Russian North to me was still a mystical safety zone. Now, this assessment sounds a bit ironic.

For many years, it was clear that the traveling to Russia would end on some day. The administrative and security rules constantly became tougher, and I anticipated that at some point these restrictions would become unacceptable to me. Yet I was not ready for the sudden change caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Although we continue to pursue our ethnographic work, the war still altered everything. The scholarly knowledge about Russia's Northern peoples is becoming more fragmented and fragile due to the war in Ukraine.

## Arctic studies in Estonia before the war in Ukraine and the effect of the war on research

In Estonia, ethnographic explorations of the Russian North and Siberia became systematic as of 1973, when the Estonian National Museum (ENM) in Tartu initiated annual field studies among the Khanty people and, more intermittently, among the Sami, Mansi, and the Nenets. This happened under the museum's new strategy of intensifying Finno-Ugric studies. ENM researchers started visiting Finno-Ugric groups in Russia in the early 1960s, and from the 1970s this focus also expanded to the Arctic.

The 1990s brought a significant change to this work; the transformation took place within a very different political and economic environment. Estonia regained its independence from Russia/Soviet Union, and Siberian studies thus became an international venture for Estonian scholars. Initially, budgetary limitations did not allow the ENM to continue large-scale Finno-Ugric fieldwork trips. In the mid-1990s, a system of scholarly grants was introduced in Estonia, and this soon became the predominant way to finance fieldwork in the Russian Arctic. In Estonia, the ENM still holds a leading role in the ethnographic study of the Russian North, winning research grants and organizing North-related scholarly conferences, as well as also publishing five special Arctic studies issues of the journal *Pro Ethnologia* between 1997 and 2001. In addition, several ethnographic exhibitions on various northern research topics were organized between the mid-1990s and early 2000s. A significant trend of the period was the development of research on the North into a more individual venture.

In the 2000s, the University of Tartu (UT) became the major centre of northern ethnographic studies in Estonia. The emergence of a new "hub" for Arctic researchers was accompanied by a growth in international collaboration, including participation

in research projects, international conferences, organizing annual Arctic workshops, and the publishing of several volumes based on these workshops. In recent years, this group of scholars at UT established the UT Arctic Studies Centre. It is now home to the largest number of ethnologists and anthropologists focusing on the Siberian Indigenous peoples outside of Russia and it supports regular fieldwork in the Russian Arctic. Recently, the Estonian Academy of Sciences appointed our Associate Professor, Aimar Ventsel, to the position of Visiting Professor in Arctic Studies.

Members of the UT Arctic Centre continued cooperation with colleagues at the ENM. Scholars from the museum have participated in several of our research projects and publications, as well as in joint field studies in the North. Most significantly, we collaborated in preparing the ENM's new Finno-Ugric permanent exhibition "Echo of the Urals," opening in 2016, which included a substantial Arctic component.

These developments looked natural just a couple of years ago. We were busy carrying out Siberian field research that today seems more like a dream. By disturbing the "hybrid peace" (see Ssorin-Chaikov 2018: 251) and launching a full-scale war against its neighbor, Russia changed everything for our small but active research team, including for me personally. Peace cannot be found anywhere, even a hybrid one that connects a peaceful home, warfare somewhere else, and a confusing discourse about a war as such (Ssorin-Chaikov 2018).

Ethnographic fieldwork trips to Siberia were first banned for us during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Russia temporarily closed its borders and international travel was severely restricted. When Russian borders re-opened for citizens of most countries, COVID-19-related travel restrictions still applied to citizens of the Baltic states. Russia allowed travel for us only after it launched its full-scale war on Ukraine. At the same time, the Estonian government applied its own restrictions on travel between Russia and Estonia. These restrictions mostly concern Russian citizens, but Estonians are strongly advised to avoid travel to Russia. Thus, the start of the Russian war against Ukraine in February 2022 did not have a sudden effect on our fieldwork options in the Russian Arctic, since we entered the war with a visa ban from the Russian side. Since then, the war has diminished our willingness to travel there considerably.

The University of Tartu, on its own terms, has implemented rules and restrictions for collaboration with our colleagues in Russia. University scholars are prohibited from conducting any official cooperation with academics in Russia in order that institutional contacts are minimized, and all collaborative projects and agreements are banned. UT rules concern also Russian and Belarusian citizens. UT was the first university in Estonia to refuse admission to students from these two countries in 2022, even before the state applied a complete visa ban against them. (Russian and Belarusian citizens may apply to study at the University if they have residence permits.) Employing scholars from these countries is also technically extremely difficult, although we are allowed to maintain individual contacts and, for example, publish articles written by our colleagues from Russia.

The war in Ukraine thus shaped a political framework than impacted our research drastically, as national and international restrictions have become stricter during the war. It is not easy to predict how the international situation will develop and for how long our research will be severely restricted.

## Our ongoing project

The overall impact of the recent crises on our Siberian research, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the Russian war against Ukraine, has been shocking. We cannot or have deliberately chosen not to travel to Russia, so that our long-term strategy of fieldwork-based research basically collapsed. However, the Arctic Studies Centre team has not given up its efforts to continue ethnographic exploration, data collection and publishing new research on Finno-Ugric and Siberian topics.

The most peculiar case is that of our ongoing research project, "The Finno-Ugric Peoples of Russia: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity," funded by the Estonian Research Council for the period of 2022–2026. Our aim was to explore the connection between ethnic and religious belonging as a factor that shapes the Finno-Ugric people's (such as the Udmurtian, Komi, Nenets and Khanty) social feelings and attitudes in the European North of Russia, Western Siberia, and the Volga-Kama region. When we prepared the project proposal, it looked to be essentially meaningful for local communities' dialogic cultural intimacy (cf. Herzfeld 2016, see also Leete 2020), as well as for the public presentation of group identity. The conceptions we planned to discuss involved situational and blurred borders, cultural intimacy, hybridity, as well as the "tacit and explicit" in people's everyday religiosity.

Our research team just received the funding, as the project time was listed as starting in January 2022. If we were to submit it a few months later, no organization would have awarded us research funds for such a collaborative venture. Firstly, the scientific experts assessing our application a year prior demanded explanation of our collaboration network in Russia. We were required to supply official letters of intent from the institutions and individual scholars, and NGOs in Russia with whom we planned to collaborate. Even before the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, we perceived this request as strange, and political conditions for such a collaboration were already becoming unstable. Even by 2021, it did not seem like a good idea to ask for such official confirmation from anybody in Russia. We understood that the experts and officials who requested the letters simply wanted to ensure that our partners in Russia knew us and of our research plans. Therefore, we succeeded in acquiring such letters from various research institutes, museums, NGOs and individuals from Western Siberia and the Russian North. Yet, only a few months later, it became clear that this cooperation plan could no longer be carried out. We hoped that these submitted letters of support would cause no harm to our Indigenous partners in the North.

A second reason for reviewers' doubt could have been that our research plan relied heavily on intensive long-term ethnographic fieldwork. As it became obvious in the second month of the project in early 2022 that conducting field studies was no longer a realistic option, our team started to consider options for alternative methods of data collecting during the Spring of 2022. Some members of our team are Russian citizens, while others from the European countries other than Estonia, so that the Russian borders theoretically remained open to them. (We did not know then that the border would soon reopen for the Estonians). This meant that travel to field sites was still technically an option. However, nobody considered long-term fieldwork as a realistic prospect. At the same time, we agreed that each team member would make their own decision on whether to travel to Russia for fieldwork or not. Considerations could differ: someone might have close family in Russia or want to support Indigenous friends. Apart from this, countries on the opposing sides of the conflict could adopt new policies regarding travel and visa issues in the future, so that uncertainty was high from the very beginning of the war.

Given such uncertainty, we decided to adjust our methods, as long as travel to Siberia and the Russian North remained seriously problematic. We used online monitoring of Indigenous communities in the Russian North and Siberia, as well as online interviews, and searched for fieldwork partners in Europe. We modified our interview questions, considering the issues of online contacts and reached out to members of the Finno-Ugric Indigenous groups residing outside of Russia.

Even these plans, appearing rational to us in the spring of 2022, turned out to be naïve. We were overly optimistic about our pre-war research objectives remaining relevant and online communication not being seriously obstructed. From the more pessimistic view, any kind of interaction with the Indigenous communities in the Russian Artic could have become impossible, so that our methodological struggles would be meaningless.

Over the past two years, an online "chat-nography" (see Kähkiö 2020) with our Indigenous friends in Russia was still possible. Regarding most of the Russian Internet domains, monitoring of sites and online communities was and still is a possibility. More serious data collection is complicated and, presumably, is becoming ever more problematic over time. In spring 2022, Russia threatened to detach its Internet from the rest of the world (or, at least, from the West). These attempts failed, but threats of new political and technical restrictions remain, as of Winter 2024. Another serious issue relates to web censorship, stalking, and closure of politically inappropriate web sites, blogs, and online groups. Regarding most social media platforms, Russian authorities apply repressions randomly; their doing so quickly erodes the feeling of security regarding online communication. This means that one needs to be careful when engaging Indigenous partners in online conversations, which, in turn, hinders our research efforts.

By happenstance, our project was scheduled in a way that has helped to illustrate the constantly changing situation in Siberian studies. Established approaches and methods no longer serve us, or indeed are necessary to follow, since nobody would award us a research grant during the war if we were to propose data collecting methods like those used in the pre-war time. In the last two years, a couple of our applications have been rejected using the argument that we do not have "adequate methods." But who has "adequate methods" for a situation of war and aggressive censorship, and how would it be possible to have one that convinces reviewers?! It is all but impossible to introduce "good methods" for studying the Indigenous groups of the North in Russia today. This uncertainty becomes more confounding if we move from this abstract claim of a shared approach by a research team to the level an individual scholar. Here the complications are even more obvious, as one cannot figure out research methods only but must address one's individual actions as well.

## Auto-ethnographic sketch

Although we make individual choices, personal practice is still framed by the understanding, at least a vision of a proper research approach established within the scholarly community. This dilemma affects us at every step and in every situation we encounter in our research; it becomes especially significant during the times of crisis.

Käihkö (2022), who has been conducting ethnography in Ukraine during the current war, suggests that both the perception of facts and the much-needed ambiguity suffer from the war. Everything appears in clear contrasts, almost without halftones. It leads to the suppression of individual attitudes and choices of action, as neutral territory is missing from the social and political scene (see Allemann, this volume, *eds*.).

For me, at present the ethnographic "field" is far away and not approachable. The study of Indigenous groups in the Russian North and Siberia has become a highly ambivalent effort. I do not view the Indigenous people as responsible for the war (although in public discourse there are claims that all residents of Russia have a "collective guilt" in this war). Yet I admit that many individuals among these groups are at least not against the war.

Should we abandon them altogether for this stance? Are those who avoid taking sides be accepted or ignored? How should one choose topics in the current situation? Is any foreign attention dangerous for Indigenous groups or individuals in Russia? Below are a few examples that this might be the case.

## Echo of the Urals exhibition and Finno-Ugric extremism

In 2016, the ENM permanent exhibition on the Finno-Ugric peoples, "Echo of the Urals," was opened at the museum's new building. I came up with the idea of this dis-

Fig. 1 Tank in Victory Park of Khanty-Mansiysk. The tank was brought to Khanty-Mansiysk in 2009 and the monument was opened next year, during the celebration of 65th anniversary of victory in WWII. There were no battles in Siberia during the WW II. This monument illustrates characteristically the war rhetoric trends in Russia during the recent decades, 2016.

play and was one of its lead curators. It remains the only permanent exhibition in the world dedicated to the Finno-Ugric Indigenous communities, most of whom inhabit the central and northern regions of Russia, including western Siberia.

Although the display has received many awards, both nationally and internationally, it has also been criticized for several shortcomings. According to the critics, the exhibition romanticized, glorified, decontextualized and simplified, and created stereotypes. It allegedly ignored the individual dimension, cultural dynamics, and reflections on the contemporary problems of the Finno-Ugric communities. In the context of the current study, it is most remarkable that the charges included the accusation that the display took an apolitical approach. Even as the exhibition was launched, we foresaw potential political trouble with it. We countered that that "…the content of this exhibition does not matter, since it still serves as a massive manifestation of support for the Finno-Ugric peoples" (Karm and Leete 2018: 35).

Although we claimed that our "romantic" exhibition had a hidden political agenda, the harsh realities brought by the war in Ukraine surfaced unexpectedly. The worst so far occurred 17 October 2023, when Russian security police arrested several

Erzyan ethnic activists, and accused them of "terrorism and extremism." Allegedly, this extremism involved plans to establish the independent national state of Erzyan Mastor and secede from the Russian Federation. If convicted, the activists could face a prison sentence of ten years (the oldest arrested elder was 89 years old) (Erzyanskie 2023). Among the hard evidence used to "prove" the Erzyan elders' terrorist and extremist actions, was a catalogue for the "Echo of the Urals" exhibition, as well as an Estonian flag. Today, any possible connection can be used against Indigenous activists in Russia: We can cause harm to our Indigenous friends even with our past actions, or just by being around.

## Connection with the past

In today's Russia, actions without any explicit political claim can still appear "radical" in certain contexts. Topics that attracted less attention in the past, appear more incriminating during the time of war. This relates, for example, to theme of Indigenous people's uprisings against the Soviet regime in the 1930s and 1940s (see, e.g., Dudeck 2024 – *eds*.). When publishing the most recent article on this issue (Leete 2023), I applied extra precaution by making the informants and other persons mentioned in the text almost completely unrecognizable. It does not mean that there are clear parallels between the events of the past and the current war, but some metaphorical connection between all wars do exist. For the Indigenous people in Russia, the current war caused a loss of agency: as one anonymous Nenets commentator on the Internet stated, "We are the Indigenous inhabitants, but it feels like we live in a foreign country" (Voice of Tundra 2023). Yet, if the sudden loss of rights during collectivization and WWII triggered uprisings almost hundred years ago, the situation today is fundamentally different; nobody anticipates radical Indigenous reactions to the current war.

However, it is also a fact that we cannot get much (if any) information about possible Indigenous discontent and unrest in the North from public sources. About seven years ago, all reports on Indigenous people's protests against the extractive industries and restrictions on Indigenous rights suddenly disappeared from regional newspapers and online portals in Russia. We have therefore entered a phase of war in Ukraine in a situation in which Indigenous voices have already been silenced in public domains.

## Individual connections

Such silencing is also somehow reflected in personal communication with my Indigenous friends. At the very beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, I did not realize that interactions with my Indigenous friends would be quite

different from that point. Traveling to my field sites was not an option in this situation; however, during the first months of the war I continued conversations with my Indigenous contacts as if the war did not affect our personal relationships. At least on mundane or ethnographic topics we could continue writing messages to each other as if nothing had changed.

With some of my correspondents, this is still the case. For example, I recently learned that the 2023 fall hunt in the Komi region failed because of an unusual invasion of migratory birds that emptied the forests of berries, resulting in the local birds having nothing to eat. It was also senseless to hang decoy berries next to bird snares if only a few hazel grouse were around; moreover the uninvited visitors would eat these as well. We continued exchanging some important information that outweighs any war news for the hunters. While talking with me over the phone, these friends do not see any problem in the fact that our countries are on the opposite sides in the Russian–Ukrainian struggle, a fact that does not matter to them at all. The hunters also understand that Russian television is not a source of ultimate truth, and they have never used the Internet.

However, with others, the conversation is not the same as it used to be. We have become opponents; somehow the war stands between us. These changes vary with different people: Some firmly support Russia's war as a patriotic effort, proclaiming and promoting their position publicly. They even attempt to convince me of the legitimacy of Russia's claims against Ukraine or figure out my attitudes more cautiously.


Fig. 2 *Rossiia dlia russkikh* – "Russia is for Russians." Slogan introduced by the Russian nationalists in the 19th century, extensively used today by the neo-Nazis. In 2010, the slogan was officially announced as extremist in Russia. Syktyvkar, 2015.

Among my friends, I also noticed sad but intriguing attempts to recraft double thinking. From the 1990s, it looked as if the need for such a skill was mostly over, or, at least, any need was not obvious. Now it appears that some of my Indigenous friends simultaneously love and hate the war and President Putin. As they try to practice this double thinking on me, how should I respond?

Fig. 3 *Rossiia dlia grustnykh* – "Russia is for the sad." Quote from songs by Aleksander Bashlachev, today used as an anti-Nazi slogan. Syktyvkar, 2020.

## Research in the remote mode

The remote research methods that many of us now use have some common features. Internet ethnography makes contacts with faraway field partners possible even if we cannot have immediate contact. But it deprives the researcher of a sense of the context for interaction (Käihkö 2020; Jackson 2021). Over the past two years, I neither found nor even searched for new interlocutors in the North. The range of people with whom I communicate has diminished, despite the ethnographic work still being a continuation of our real-life contacts and friendship. This has its own advantages, and I can still perform research using these friends' assistance (comp. Jackson 2021; Roborgh 2021).

Unfortunately, I cannot see any real alternative to "Internet ethnography." It appears to be a logical choice if one does not want to quit ethnographic investigation completely. The virtuality of the approach enables some distance when one needs to be cautious and wants to contemplate the effect of war on relationships. The degree of cultural intimacy, reached over the years of ethnographic field trips, is now severely compromised. The period of ethnographic isolation is extending, and I become constantly more inexperienced in the lives of my Indigenous counterparts.

I started to document random evidence just in case this could be useful in the future. Even an innocent topic may appear complicated. I hesitate to publish research based on fresh empirical data, as the consequences of doing such could be unanticipated, even if some topics appear rather innocent. For example, I observe some Finno-Ugric public social media groups dealing with ethnographic and folklore topics, yet I have not contacted the administrators of these groups, as any explicit contact with a foreigner could be harmful. This is an especially relevant concern if these groups operate on the VK platform, as most of the repressions related to wartime online political violations in Russia are connected with this ISP.

I also feel that there could be a danger of overconfidence grounded in my long-term experience of traveling in Russia, and, before that, living in the USSR. We are inclined to think that there is a specific immunity among post-Soviet people from Russian politics and propaganda. It is certainly an illusion, at least in the most part, and one needs to hold back on any claim to full comprehension.

Fig. 4 Urban folklore labels the World War II (the Great Patriotic War) memorial as "The aunties are roasting the crocodile", enabling a cryptic anti-war attitudes and silent confrontation with the official patriotic discourse and war propaganda in Russia. Syktyvkar, 2016.

## Going public

During the last two years, I published several long articles about the connection between Indigenous groups in the North and the current war in Ukraine in an Estonian newspaper. Some of these essays have been republished by other newspapers and public online portals. My overall aim has been to support a constructive discourse about the Northern peoples. The mainstream newspapers and the Internet news portals commonly deliver news that characterize Siberian Indigenous peoples (such as the Buryat or Sakha) as the most savage warriors in Ukraine and the blind supporters of Putin's regime. We need to give the Indigenous people of Russia a "human face" and to demonstrate that they may not be completely happy either with their life under the Russian rule or with the war.

Several of my Indigenous friends in Russia have condemned me for that. They are not war protagonists but argued that I could not grasp the impact of my words. They also asserted that I did not understand how things worked in Russia. Be more cunning, they advise.

In today's situation, autoethnography is very different from earlier times, certainly from two years ago. Before the war, the field appeared as a familiar one. Now we all fumble in the dark fog of war. Nothing appears natural or self-evident anymore. The risk is to not miss anything, as nothing we can see is now recognizable. It seems that we have suddenly lost our skills of comprehension, and what we should be telling the wider public is unclear.

## Conclusion

As this paper illustrates, Siberian/Northern studies developed in Estonia over the past three decades, according to a certain logic, framed by political realities and international collaboration, and facilitated by a satisfactory relationship between Estonia and Russia. The Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014, and particularly, the all-out war since early 2022, have fundamentally changed our possibilities and modes of ethnographic exploration. Travels to the North have almost stopped, replaced by remote modes of data collection. But the precipitous onset of the war meant that we were not prepared for this transformation.

Our pre-war actions have affected our Indigenous partners in Russia and have been used against them. Apparently, even rather innocent acts from the past appear dangerous now. The war also affected the choice and scope of our research themes, focussing now on ones that received less attention previously.

The impact of the war has been the most profound on our personal relationships with Indigenous partners and on the methods and ethical considerations of our ethnographic fieldwork. These aspects take a central position in our professional

development. The war has made our research practices more "hybrid;" it complicates connections with the field immensely. We are still in the process of finding adequate remote methods of research, meaning that we do not know yet what we are actually doing. Also, it has become increasingly problematic to communicate the situation of the Indigenous peoples of the Russian North and Siberia to the public.

Certain aspects of cultural intimacy in the Russian North can hardly be bridged now. We held a mutual illusion that the "other" would share our understanding of events, but it was not the case. This was partly related to the intensification of the propaganda broadcasted by the Russian mass media, depicting people of the West as "evil." Some of my counterparts in Russia have changed their views over recent years, while others have not not.

This overview demonstrates that the war in Ukraine has had a severe impact on the way scholars acquire cultural understanding of, and produce knowledge about, the people of the Russian North. Diverse views on the character of the war make our connections with the ethnographic field fragile and our knowledge is now fragmented. Mutual misunderstandings regarding the war can destroy our long-term relationships with Indigenous research partners. In addition, when research is done from a distance, our ethnographic comprehension lacks cohesion and we miss an integrated sense of life and culture in the North.

It is difficult to predict how our research will be possible in the future. It will depend in part on whether Internet sources remain available to us, and we can maintain some kind of personal connection. A certain type of human relations over the political and ideological divides has by now been established. If nothing changes radically, these individual networks will gain even more weight. Re-acquiring the skill of "reading between the lines" has already become a significant cognitive requirement; in the future, it may become even more essential.

Overall, my predictions regarding the prospects of Siberian studies are rather pessimistic. We will continue our explorations, one way or another. But it is very unlikely that we will manage to raise the next generation of researchers if nothing changes. Although perspectives for Siberian research look gloomy, we still aspire for a miracle of a better future for the peoples of the North, and for our field. For now, we move step by step, reacting and adjusting to the situation as we go.

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## Figures

1 Tank in Victory Park of Khanty-Mansiysk. The tank was brought to Khanty-Mansiysk in 2009 and the monument was opened next year, during the celebration of 65 years anniversary of victory in WWII. There were no battles in Siberia during the WW II. This monument illustrates characteristically the war rhetoric trends in Russia during the recent decades. Photo: Art Leete, 2016.
2 Россия для русских. – "Russia is for Russians." Slogan introduced by the Russian nationalists in the 19th century, extensively used today by the neo-Nazis. In 2010, the slogan was officially announced as extremist in Russia. Syktyvkar. Photo: Anonymous, 2015.
3 Россия для грустных. – "Russia is for the sad." Quote from songs by Aleksander Bashlachev, today used as an anti-Nazi slogan. Syktyvkar. Photo: Anonymous, 2020.
4 Urban folklore labels the World War II (the Great Patriotic War) memorial as "The aunties are roasting the crocodile," enabling a cryptic anti-war attitudes and silent confrontation with the official patriotic discourse and war propaganda in Russia. Syktyvkar. Photo: Art Leete, 2016.