

## 5 SAMI WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN WAR ON UKRAINE

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### Introduction

Anthropologists working in the Arctic have been following the events preceding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine for some time and with a growing despair (cf. Kasten et al. 2024). Nevertheless, the shock of 24 February 2022, and the violence incurred in the following months were overwhelming, particularly to those of us who have spent a considerable part of our research careers studying the Russian Arctic. Nor could we grasp the rupture that these months were to cause in our work and lives. News of the Russian troops marauding Ukrainian villages; of Indigenous people supporting the war, breaking up life-long ties with the international Indigenous institutions, or simply being expelled from their homeland; and of Russian anthropologists, now compelled to take sides or experience opposition from their colleagues and former students, was almost unbearable.

It took me time to personally come to terms with the reality of these quickly unfolding events, and, even more, to deal with the pain caused by the news from Ukraine and Russia, and with the grief of many colleagues and students affected by the war. I also had to realize that the interruption in my fieldwork caused by the COVID pandemic was not coming to an end but was becoming a fact of life. I am still struggling with it and with the physical distance from the region that I have studied for more than twenty years, and to which I still relate daily by following the news and people on social media. Has the war and the physical distance created political borders and ruptures in the way desired by Russian authorities and propagandists? This is one of the questions that I would like to answer in this essay.

To me, the war on democracy, liberty, and multiculturalism in Russia did not start on 24 February 2022. Indigenous people and anthropologists alike have been experiencing and recording how possibilities for research in the Russian Arctic have been increasingly limited, at least since 2012. These paralleled the decreasing possibilities for Indigenous activism, but worst of all, the efforts to limit and control Indigenous people's agency and weaken Indigenous legislation and rights (Suliandziga and Sul-yandziga 2020). These events solidified a split in the Indigenous movement between organizations and ideas that received support from abroad and those associated with the alleged "local tradition" and state support. Before the law on "foreign agents" (*inostrannye agenty*) in Russia was adopted in 2012, all Russian Sami organizations

received support and often significant financial help from abroad. Even after the law was adopted, there was an expectation among Kola Sami that they were moving toward integration, by mirroring the self-government structures of the Nordic Sami (Berg-Nordlie 2011; Vladimirova 2014). For some time, the border marked by political alliances with the West or with the regional authorities in Russia was permeable and many Indigenous politicians and representatives could contextually express a position (Vladimirova 2006).

A few events in my personal journey marked the change in possibilities for anthropological research in the Russian North. During a month of fieldwork in 2014 that roughly coincided with the Russian invasion of Crimea, I was for the first time persistently asked to situate myself and my worldview, on this occasion, regarding the EU (and its position). I was not sure what weight my interlocutors gave to my answers, but I ascribed their persistence to the nature of the project I then carried out. It was a study about the economic development strategy in the Arctic and my helpers were primarily local politicians and bureaucrats. Ethnographic work during that visit showed a growing centralized effort to build up identity, and educational and cultural practices around the newly revived notion of “patriotism.” I did not publicize this research because of the discomfort that my analysis of “patriotism” might hurt the feelings of my field helpers and compromise their trust.

Meanwhile, meeting Indigenous people at international events or at my home university in Sweden provided additional opportunities and perspectives. Now, with limited ethnographic accessibility of the Russian field and the growing risks for collaborators in Russia, use of secondary data and methods that are usually seen as complementary in anthropological research are taking larger space.

Here, I present a reflection on how in a parallel way my possibilities for anthropological research and the situation of Indigenous women in the Kola Peninsula are changing. The condition of women in a growingly conservative world, which Russia has become a linchpin, is of utmost importance. While women and LGBTQ+ rights violations have been given some scholarly attention, I am not aware of any sources that explore the impact of conservative policy in Russia on Indigenous women. Without possibilities for “proper” ethnographic work and with the increasing risks for local collaborators that make interviewing ethically inappropriate, I can only outline the contours of such research by drawing analytically and intuitively some of the impacts that conservative politics in Russia has had on ethnic groups, women, and militarization, particularly on the Kola Peninsula. The chapter provides a personal account of the state of anthropological research of Indigenous women in the Russian Arctic in the third year of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

My account however goes back long before the start of the war in February 2022. In addition to my ethnographic data collected between 2001 and 2017, this essay is grounded in the reading, interpretation, and analysis of the recent publications by émigré Indigenous activists, politicians, and scholars, and some posts by Indigenous

persons on social media. I treat the latter with particular care and do not provide any specific information and references, due to security concerns. In this, I may violate the usual practice to provide space for interlocutors' personal voices and authorship and I take full responsibility for my data and conclusions.

## Indigenous women in Russia and the conservative turn

### *Indigenous women's leadership*

Anthropologists have long argued for important and, in some contexts (like the Sami), even dominant role of women in Indigenous movement in the Russian Arctic since the early 1990s (Ssorin-Chaikov 2002; Øverland and Berg-Nordlie 2012). In contrast to the old Soviet stereotypes of Indigenous cultures as “patriarchal” and “repressive to women,” and a proclivity in Soviet texts to present discourses of women as undervalued and subjected to inequalities, women and girls have played an active role and have outnumbered men in Indigenous political and civil organizations, even when men held the leaders' positions. This process has been connected to the Soviet history: women have had a leading role within the educational sector, and the state-initiated formation of Indigenous intelligentsia reproduced such gender division.

Female leadership among the Kola Sami intelligentsia and ethnic politics has received a deserved attention (see Øverland and Berg-Nordlie 2012). The great number and role of women in Sami intelligentsia was the outcome of Soviet professional specialization, where mandatory high school education gave women career possibilities in the urban settings. Due to the forced sedentarization of the formerly semi-nomadic Kola Sami people, the majority of Sami women were alienated from reindeer husbandry during the Soviet restructuring of traditional economy. Many Sami women thus gained higher status in the Soviet society, due to their education and urban jobs, that were attributed higher value in the Soviet “modernity” setting than male tundra-based jobs in the reindeer husbandry (Konstantinov 2015; Vladimirova 2006). The displacement of the Indigenous population from smaller villages to bigger villages and towns, due to militarization and economic development in the 1950s, contributed to women's increased urbanization (Afanasyeva 2018; Allemann 2018). Thus, well-educated Sami women with good standing in general society and high status in Sami communities, due to their jobs in the public sector (like schoolteachers), were well positioned to take leadership in the mobilization and self-organization of the movement for Indigenous emancipation.

In the Kola Peninsula, I have met with many Indigenous women leaders and participants in Sami organizations, such as the Kola Sami Association (AKS), Sami “clan communities” (*rodovye obshchiny*) that aimed to develop traditional economies such as reindeer husbandry, fishing, and gathering, handicrafts, and ethnographic tourism.

Women predominate on the staff of the museums in the village of Lovozero and in Murmansk, the Sami Cultural Centre, the Sami Parliament (*Kuellenegk Neark Sam' Sobbar*, in Kildin Sami), Kola Sami radio, Sami dance and song ensemble in the village of Lovozero, to mention just a few. At the same time, my colleague, Yulian Konstantinov, and I have repeatedly pointed to the alienation and absence of Sami women from the tundra, the setting of reindeer economy. The displacement of family life to villages and towns contributed to the conversion of the tundra from a family “home” to an “extractive space.” In the case of reindeer herding, it became a space for the extraction of meat, hides, skins for clothing and souvenirs, and antlers that could provide subsistence and cash to families in the village (Konstantinov 2005). This conversion was behind the long decay of the Sami reindeer economy (Konstantinov 2023). The shrinking of reindeer herding has had a complex impact on Sami women, as well as on men, who were directly involved in the economy. Although this impact varied among Sami women with different occupations and residence, the long-term indirect impact must have been devastating, since even in the urban political and cultural Sami activism, reindeer were identified as the “pillar” of Sami culture.

#### *Indigenous activism and international cooperation*

As representatives of Sapmi, the traditional territory and cultural area of the Sami people, straddling Russia, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, Kola Sami women have had



Fig. 1 International project in support of the Sami community (*obshchina*) Puaz in the village of Loparskoe: visiting Norwegian Sami and sharing handicraft experiences, 2010.

increased opportunities to engage in international cooperation since early 1990s. At the same time, other groups of population in the region have repeatedly condemned the “benefits” they attribute to such international cooperation for the Kola Sami community. Critics used moral terms, to accuse Sami activists for their alleged “greed” and for “betraying” national values such as collectivism and solidarity between ethnicities, and ethnic culture, like, for example reindeer economy, for material gain. Rather than seeing Sami female leadership as a source for personal growth, women’s empowerment, increased social status and cultural development, those challenging support from abroad have singled out Indigenous women as “morally vulnerable” to manipulation and corruption.

The successful political and cultural leadership of the Kola Sami women have exposed them to community, social, and scholarly criticism and made them indeed vulnerable subjects. This vulnerability has become instrumentalized by the authorities to control Indigenous communities and activism. For example, in September 2014, a Russian Sami politician and activist posted on social media that she was actively prevented from crossing the Norwegian border and taking a plane to New York to attend the World Conference on Indigenous People. At the start of the trip, she discovered that the car that she planned to use had punctured tires. She managed to arrange a ride in another vehicle, but this was stopped twice on its way for lengthy document and luggage check by the Russian road police. During the second check, a young man without a uniform opened the door of the car and tried to pull her bag out. She managed to overcome all hindrances and cross the border, but only long after her plane had departed. With help from Norwegian Sami friends, she managed to acquire a new ticket and joined the conference with a delay. Pavel Sulyandziga, one of the founders of the Indigenous movement in Russia and an active member of the Russian Indigenous peoples’ association was not so lucky. His passport was first taken at the Moscow Sheremetevo airport for a check, and after this, was pronounced invalid: a page was missing.<sup>1</sup>

A slow but obvious regression of Indigenous interests in the Murmansk Region (*oblast’*) started earlier, exacerbating Indigenous women’s vulnerabilities by exploiting their personal histories and interpersonal relations. In the process, international allies and helpers of Indigenous organizations were abruptly limited by the introduction of the Russian “Foreign agent law” in 2012 (RF Law N121-FZ 2012). Earlier, the Sami organizations created and sustained with the support from Nordic Sami in the 1990s, such as AKS and the Organization of the Sami of Murmansk Region (OOSMO), lost their dominant representative positions to the new organizations created more recently and affiliated to the regional bureaucracy (mainly, the Council of Representatives of Indigenous People of the North at the Government of Murmansk Region). The Council of Representatives was granted the right to distribute state subsidies

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1 <https://bolt-dev.dh-north.org/files/dhn-pdf/fn1sulyandziga.pdf> [accessed 12.05.2024]

among a selected few among the newly created Sami “clan communities.” The communities that had previously received grant money from abroad were not eligible for such subsidies (Vladimirova 2014).

The creation of the Russian Sami Parliament (*Kuellenegk neark Sam’ Sobbar*), one of the newest Sami organizations, registered as an NGO in 2010, was a step toward the expected unification in Indigenous self-governance across Sápmi (Berg-Nordlie 2015). The Government of Murmansk Region immediately took a negative stand against the Parliament and its female chair, rejecting its legitimacy in the Russian political and administrative context, questioning its representativeness and role among the Kola Sami, and opposing it, favoring instead the bureaucratically institutionalized Council of Representatives (Vladimirova 2014). The Kola Sami Parliament thus could mainly find its place and role via social media, where its leader posted critical commentaries on the violations of Sami interests and rights, including extractive projects plans, environmental pollution, cultural appropriation in the production of souvenirs, or the use of Sami symbols in state propaganda. This competition and contention between Sami organizations in Russia has contributed to a negative image of Indigenous Sami, and most specifically, of their female leaders and politicians, both within the Sami community and the general society. At international Indigenous and political settings, it has contributed to the uncertainty about the Kola Sami representation, but also to better understanding of the increasingly repressive character of the Russian state.

On a federal level, the Russian Ministry of Justice closed the all-Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) in 2012 for reportedly “gross violations of federal law.”<sup>2</sup> After six months the Association was allowed to reopen, with a new chair and leadership elected that, according to Indigenous activists’ allegations, efficiently ended Indigenous opposition to the government (Suliandziga and Sulyandziga 2020; 2024).

International cooperation has been an important factor of identity formation among the Russian Sami politicians and people. Identity was formed through the solidarities and positionality of the Sami that were more complex than just an association with one of the two political and geographic poles, “West-Russia.” This simple polarization model is being instrumentalized by today’s Russian propaganda to justify the war in Ukraine as a defense of an imaginary “Russian World” (*Russkii mir*) from a demonized West. Sami activists’ positioning concerning these poles is contextual (see Allemann, *this volume – eds.*). Even if today’s polarization and alliances with one or the other poles may be seen more clearly than before the beginning of the war, certain flexibility is still maintained. Those Sami activists, like Andrei Danilov and Aleksandr Slupachik, who took more radical position towards the government at the start of the war, and were forced out of the country as refugees, are now close to the “West” pole. Another group of Sami activists, also predominantly men, publicly

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2 <https://m.nashaniva.com/ru/articles/83903/> [accessed 17.07.2024]

supported the “special military operation” in Ukraine, thus positioning themselves on the side of Russia and the Russian world.

Most Sami activists and regular people, women included, seem to be more modest in publicly demonstrating their solidarities with the war and government policy. Unfortunately, this observation is only based on my survey of published photos and statements in the Russian media and on social networks, both the Russian VKonakte (VK), and Facebook that is now banned in Russia. Some Sami women, who continue to reside in Russia, enact this complexity in self-identification and positioning through their posts or reactions to others’ posts on Facebook. Their critiques of the current Indigenous policies and the war are hinted at through posting material, or emojis and ‘likes’ under Nordic Sami’ and scholars’ critical comments and material. Such posts are never directly critical of the war or of the Russian repression of Indigenous and human rights, but indirectly they express resistance by quoting poems, songs, and sharing pictures, where hidden meanings can be found that emphasize the inhumanity and injustice of the Russian government.

Russian Indigenous politicians and activists who have expressed openly their protest against the unjust state and corporations’ policies towards Russia’s minority people have been either silenced or expelled from the country. The government strategy relies on weakening their authority and influence by questioning their legitimacy as representatives of their people. The ongoing debate regarding émigré Indigenous politicians is loaded in many of Russian northern regions. Propaganda repeatedly associates them with the alleged “Western agents” who aim to weaken and destroy the ethnic unity and spread fake allegations of violation of Indigenous rights in Russia. It attributes them simply to the “corrupted morals” of Indigenous émigrés.

Such propaganda, according to some Sami posts, is even being distributed at influential international forums, such as the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples. In April 2024, the official Indigenous delegation from Russia, featuring a Sami politician who has openly expressed his support for Putin’s military policy, stressed several mechanisms for the Russian state support of Indigenous communities and individuals in the country. This has been interpreted as an attempt to paint the criticism of Russian Indigenous policies as “ungrounded” and motivated by the Western hostility and ideological war on Russia. The current debate on Indigenous emigres is, therefore, built on a consistent state strategy to destabilize the unity and cooperation within the Indigenous communities and groups in Russia, and within the global movement for Indigenous rights, in general (Vladimirova 2014). As mentioned, the dichotomy and the need for Sami individuals and organizations to associate with one of the “poles,” Russia and the collective West, have been enforced and manipulated by Russian authorities. In this situation, it is the Sami men who happened to represent the identification with either Russia or the West. Sami women, as I argue below, do not seem to openly oppose the official political line, but also continue to use the available limited options to mark their resistance and to protect the integrity of Sami society.

*The conservative turn in Russia and Sami feminism*

The erosion of organized and coordinated Indigenous rights activism in Russia roughly coincides in time with the conservative turn in gender policies in the country, in general (Vladimirova and Liarskaia 2023). Starting around 2013, the state launched an ideological campaign to spread and affirm moral conservatism under the banner of “traditional values,” addressing areas such as family, patriotism, and Orthodoxy (Gradskova 2020). The campaign has intensified since the start of the war in 2022, alongside the prosecution of LGBTQ+ persons. The sources of this ideology and its messages have multiple dissonances, discordances, and even contradictions, even among their most radical proponents such as, for example, nationalist organizations (Brankova 2023). Ideologues have not elaborated explicitly how “traditional family values” should influence Indigenous or other ethnically non-Russian people across the Russian Federation.

Interestingly, the focus on Orthodox traditional family values provided an incentive for some Sami female activists to delve into genealogical and family history research, to draw family trees, and to collect stories on women’s roles in Sami society. Before 2010, such topics were predominantly interesting to ethnographers and scholars. In some popular presentations and also in conversations with me, some Sami women discussed with excitement the elevated position of women in “traditional” Sami society in the past, describing it even as a “matriarchy.” Even though Russian ethnographers and Sami writers alike question the latter term (Bořshakova 2005), I see its importance not in its historical accuracy, but as a search for continuity and



Fig. 2 Sami teacher and founder of the folklore groups “Voavskhess” and “Oirenich,” Emilia Dobrynina. In the picture, she tells the author about her family history and memories. The interview is in collaboration with Lovozero Library’s project of collecting Sami family histories and genealogical trees, 2007.



authenticity, first of the important role of women in Sami politics of the 1990s and 2000s, and second, of Sami women's activism, of which Sami are unique among the Indigenous peoples in Russia. The Kola Sami Women Forum was formally established in the 1990s as a section of the Sami Women Forum. The Sami Women Forum, also known as SNF (*Sami Nisson Forum*), was originally found as a network of Sami women in the province of Finmark, in Norway in 1993, to provide equal opportunities for Sami women to be politically active. Since its inception, SNF has expanded its activities beyond state borders and includes Sami women from the three Nordic countries plus Russia.

I have been aware of its existence, but like Sami and other local people have hardly distinguished its activities from the general Sami activism. Its underground Indigenous feminist agenda has never been made public. With the exception of newspaper announcements over the years about a few meetings of SNF that took place in Murmansk, it had little public visibility. My field research with the leader of the organization in 2011–2015 left me with the impression that the forum activities were also presented as a continuation of the Soviet women's councils (*zhensoveti*) that were organized and run by the Communist party authorities. In 2018, the Russian Sami Women Forum became better presented online, where its chair published some essential documents, such as its Indigenous feminist agenda that mirrors the SNF agenda, and the plan of action of SNF for 2018–2019, translated into Russian. Kola Sami Women Forum had twenty-one members in 2020. Among the organization's global aims is spreading information about the life of Sami women; raising awareness about it, education, and improving the state of Sami women and gender equality in Sami society; helping national and international cooperation, and more (Vladimirova and Liarskaia 2023).

SNF runs projects aiming at increasing awareness about gender inequality faced by Sami women, both in public spaces and from the majority groups, and within Indigenous communities and smaller social groups, like families. Important spheres of activity are Sami language and culture development through literature, arts, and traditional handicrafts (Fig.3, *next page*). The forum makes important contributions to ethno-political activism, like other Sami organizations – such as the raising of the Sami flag on 6 February, “International Sami Day,” and the organization of, and participation in international Indigenous events. In this sense, it is an important player in international Sami mobilization and integration.<sup>3</sup>

While Russian Sami women's activism is well-established, its Indigenous feminist agenda, inspired by the Nordic Sami feminism, emerged relatively recently. If such an agenda is only representative of the membership of the SNF, its public statements constitute an impressive act of resistance, when seen alongside Russian governmental politics of increasing appropriation of resources and control over Indigenous freedom

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3 <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/17382> [accessed 17.07.2024]

of expression and conservative gender politics. The conceptualization of Kola Sami feminism as resistance, suggested in a recent publication (Vladimirova and Liarskaia 2023), is both analytical and subjective, as described by the chair of the Sami Women's Forum. The Russian Sami feminist agenda remains underdeveloped within the local community, and it is obscured in the current web releases that feature activities related to improved family life, language, and folklore revitalization.



Fig. 3 An event at the Sami Centre in the village of Lovozero. On the stage, Sami veteran of labor, and reindeer herder, Vladimir Galkin, and Aleksandra Antonova, a Sami intellectual and the author of the Sami Cyrillic alphabet, receive tokens of respect. In 2012, Aleksandra Antonova received the Sami Women's Forum prize Golegiella, for her contribution to preservation and development of the Sami language, 2007.

In the past, Sami activists and politicians prioritized Indigenous activism as a path to rights to their culture and resources. In contrast, women's activism, represented as being in harmony with the Kremlin's and regional politicians' rhetoric, seems unlikely to remain discernible as activism. Female vulnerability is in this way being used as a resource. Feminist activism provides a space of resistance that is of limited significance given the small number of participants, and the interrupted cooperation and exchange with Nordic Sami and their organizations. The impact of updated state ideologies on Indigenous activism and limited funding in relation to the war has had a more fundamental impact on women. Interviews with Sami Women Forum mem-

bers in the time of the war could have been an invaluable source for further understanding how members experience and negotiate the role of the organization, and of its feminist agenda. In the absence of direct and free conversations with them, I can only guess that such resistance is an important part of their identity at the moment. An indirect clue is also the continuous activity of some of its members on Facebook and their effort to stay connected with me and other scholars, as well as the Nordic Sami partners.

### Militarization of Indigenous culture and Sami women

Areas of cultural production and performance that presently receive more centralized support are those that contribute to affirming military identities and militarization of the society (Lutz 2002). Such activities are not new, and to some extent the support for these shows continuity with Soviet militarization in the Cold War context. As scholars have pointed out, while militarization affects both men and women, its impacts differ along gender lines (Enloe 2000). Militarization has often been associated with masculinities and studied in parallel with the latter. Konstantinov described in detail the complementarity of relations between reindeer herding brigades in the tundra and military bases in the Kola Peninsula, one of the most heavily militarized areas in the Russian Arctic since 1950s (Konstantinov 2005; 2023). In a recent article, I explored aspects of militarization of Indigenous reindeer herders, where gender distinction is premised on the occupational and spatial division that Soviet reindeer husbandry created (Vladimirova 2024). These processes also have an impact on Indigenous women's subjectivities and on their alignment with the purposes of militarization. Due to women's alienation from the work of reindeer herding in the tundra, they are more affected by militarism in other (urban and village) spaces and institutions (see below).

As activists, Sami women have been part of many diverse initiatives of resistance to governmental-imposed militarization. It also included resistance extended to several mining projects and the evaluation of their impact on Indigenous communities and economies, such as reindeer herding and fishing. At international forums, Kola Sami female activists used to voice complaints about military personnel harassing Sami women and girls in the tundra and village. A story that circulated in the early 2000s was about a drunk group of military personnel who took a Sami girl on a helicopter, and when she protested, let her jump out of the helicopter, when it was airborne (Vladimirova 2006). The story provides no details about the further condition and life of the girl after the accident. Dehumanization of the Sami by military staff has been one of Sami and reindeer herders' narratives, while stories of mutual help and cooperation between herding brigades and soldiers in the tundra are also common (Konstantinov 2005).

### *Festivals*

Despite the spatial proximity between reindeer herders and the Russian military, and some similarities in their life arrangements (i.e., being 'on shift' in the tundra for extended periods of time), these professions are celebrated in the village of Lovozero on different days. Soldiers were given tribute on 23 February, the "Fatherland Defenders' Day," of which some people in the village made fun by calling it the "Russian Valentine's Day," as it was also marked as the glorification of men and masculinity. The celebrations that I attended in 2003 and in 2007 were merely a two-hour-long concert in the village House of Culture. The event was not popular among soldiers from the nearby military bases, but it attracted some local youth on break from their obligatory military training. The concert was more popular among village residents, primarily elderly women, children, and youth. The big hall was full, and the repertoire featured speeches by the municipal administration, and popular songs. Songs and dances were performed by local non-professional groups, among them the Sami and Komi choirs and dance collectives run at the village House of Culture.



Fig. 4 Concert hall in the House of Culture, the village of Lovozero. On February 23, the village celebrates the "Day of the Defenders of the Fatherland," 2003.

Indigenous women and girls, together with other youth, were actively engaged in all kinds of celebrations, festivals, and events organized at the municipal level in Lovozero. Following the Soviet tradition of a show of multiculturalism, the Sami were involved in various roles, such as dancers and singers, masters, and sellers of handicrafts. Such folklore and cultural production were strongly influenced by the Soviet political agenda and aesthetics of "modernization of tradition." Synergies between folklore and songs with a positive association with military victory were common.

Reindeer herders were also celebrated at the “Festival of the North” organized during a weekend in late winter, a tradition that was initiated in the late 1920s as part of the search for modern Soviet traditions to replace religious festivals (Vladimirova 2017). A recent article provides a historical genealogy of Indigenous sports as part of the analysis of how, starting in 2013, regional authorities invested in the revival and renewal of festivals that featured “Indigenous sports” to consolidate rural population in the “confrontation with an external enemy” (Mankova 2024). One of the main attractions of the festival in Lovozero was the reindeer sled races that featured mastery, physical fitness, knowledge of the terrain, and Arctic aesthetics. Even though sled races involved women in some areas, in Lovozero it was predominantly a masculine sport. It reinforced gender division in herding, where women’s role was centered around urban and village-based cultural activities, like cooking and serving traditional dishes, making and selling handicrafts, and singing and dancing to celebrate the winners of “masculine performances” in the races during the closing concert in the House of Culture. In this instance, it resembles the Soldiers’ celebration on 23 February.

### *Rituals*

A ritual that has been performed without interruption over many decades in the village of Lovozero is the celebration of the Russian “Victory Day” on 9 May. In contrast to the “Fatherland Defenders’ Day,” and the Festival of the North, the Victory Day Celebration is commonly dominated by commemoration and celebration of veterans, who, during the period of my fieldwork, were predominantly “veterans of labor,” due to the long time passed since WWII. “Veterans of labor” is a category that does not seem to be formally defined; in my observations, it included retired employees



Fig. 5 Concert in the House of Culture in the village of Lovozero as part of the May 9, Victory Day celebration. The Sami group Oiiar dances, 2002.

who had higher positions, including in reindeer husbandry. The usual gathering place was the Monument of Victims of WWII in the village, where local authorities gave speeches. The meetings had never been heavily attended, in my experience. On the other hand, many local people celebrated the Victory Day as a family event, to commemorate their relatives affected by WWII, to show respect to the older generation, and to gather with one's extended family.<sup>4</sup>

A newer ritual that ties Indigenous reindeer herders in militarization and the drive for "Soviet/Russian patriotism" was the recently introduced "Memory Day of Reindeer Transport Battalions." The recruitment of aboriginal reindeer and herders from the Nenets and Murmansk Regions in WWII has been mentioned in military history (Kupriianov 1975), but I suspect that its popular representations are being re-shaped to serve centralized political agendas of ethnic unity. In 1941, at (Soviet) Karelian Front's 14th Army, three reindeer battalions were recruited, consisting of transport reindeer, sleds, and harnesses for them, practicing herders, and dogs from the Nenets and Murmansk Regions (Kanev 2016). This history, its representations, and ritualization deserve a separate extended study.

The origin myth of the newly built memorial in Lovozero focuses on Nina Afanasëva, one of the first post-Soviet Sami leaders and activists, who in the early 1990s, founded AKS, the first Sami organization. Nina Afanasëva allegedly first raised the question about such a memorial back in the 1990s. Also, in my field research reindeer herders and villagers have often mentioned with pride the participation in, and contribution of reindeer and herders to Russia's WWII victory. Younger Sami activists took up the memorial idea in 2011, according to the myth, and after a negotiation with regional bureaucrats received a grant from the regional government and from the mining company, Norilsk Nickel. The memorial was designed in 2019 by the Smolensk sculptor Igor Chumakov and was erected in the region's capital city of Murmansk in 2020 (Mikhailov 2020). At its inauguration, the governor of Murmansk Region Andrei Chibis emphasized restoring historical justice to the "most modest and peace-loving heroes" of WWII. The current president of AKS, in her turn, stressed its role in Sami social memory and education of the Russian Federation's citizens in patriotic values.<sup>5</sup> The memorial materialized the process of heroization of Indigenous herders in relation to WWII – the leading event in Russian state military history and identity.

At this point, I have no access to the area to visit the memorial, observe ritual practices or interview participants, so my knowledge and analysis are limited to visual and written material from media sources. So, my interpretations are very limited, without being able to consider Sami peoples' conceptualization and their emotional attachment, if any, to the memorial. Posts by the Kola Sami on social media expressed

4 As I have not attended the Victory Day celebration in Lovozero since 2014, I have no knowledge if it has changed today. But in my earlier experience, it had a role in perpetuating the memory of the heavy toll and sacrifices that Soviet people paid for the WWII victory.

5 <https://b-port.com/news/247426> [accessed 17.07.2024]

positive feelings about the monument, and that a celebration day of the reindeer battalion heroes was codified in a special law by the Murmansk Regional Duma. Many people shared pictures of the commemoration events. In these pictures, I observed that attendees and performers were predominantly Indigenous women, as was the group that drove the project to completion. It is an interesting contrast with the two male figures presented by the sculptor, one sitting on, and the other staying next to a sled that is being pulled by three reindeer. Without asking the sculptor and activists involved, the memorial seems to represent contemporary ideas and reindeer herding imagery of spatial and professional gender split. It also reinforces ideas of gender roles and divisions in militarization, despite current Russian attempts to incorporate female soldiers in the army.

As Russian propaganda posts also witness, women in war are often attributed the role of medical and moral support, also of grieving and preserving the heroic memories. Without the possibility of asking participants, I can only speculate whether the monument conjured for them a celebration of Sami culture, of reindeer and herders who endured (and perished) in the war, along with the general respect for the memory of Indigenous persons who sacrificed their lives for the war. Perhaps, a driving factor for this project was that it provided one of the last spaces left for Indigenous agency and activism. Even though such social spaces were carefully regulated by the authorities, they still could serve as a “call” for Indigenous mobilization and resistance of sort. The alliance of AKS with the regional officials was also notable, since it is the first Indigenous organization in local popular memory, and the most tightly associated with the West, that also continues to feature Sami women leadership. It suggests that it aims to secure its ongoing existence in the “insecure” historical time.

### *Cultural appropriation*

Domains of culture, such as Indigenous language, can also be exploited for the purposes of militarization. Since early times, Indigenous languages were used by various actors to promote and even enforce ideas, propaganda, and beliefs. An emblematic example are translations of the Bible into different Sami dialects in the Nordic countries as part of missionary activities in the 1700s and 1800s.<sup>6</sup> In the Russian context, regional governments have promoted their image of support to Indigenous culture through translations of Russian classical literature, for example, Alexander Pushkin, into Indigenous languages.

On 4 November 2020, the Day of Russian Peoples’ Unity, Russian social media VK announced the release of a flash mob “The whole country sings Katiusha,” where one of the versions was performed by a Sami girl in the Russian Sami language. “Katiusha,”

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6 Until present day, the literature that explores how these translations triggered the development of Sami languages and helped their preservation outnumbers critical perspectives on language appropriation and colonization.

first authored and performed in 1938, was a popular military song during WWII, and a famous multiple-launch rocket system has been nicknamed after it. The song was associated with Russian military power and victory; it was thus a powerful tool in military propaganda and mobilization when translated into and aired in Indigenous languages. “Katiusha” was performed and circulated by Sami women on the net, being celebrated as a sign of respect for, and development of Indigenous cultural production.

Victory Day (9 May), the Festival of the North, and the Memory Day of Reindeer Transport Battalions are powerful sources of knowledge production, embodiment, and of emotional relations that help align Indigenous people with the purposes of today’s militarization. They are however not as obvious to outsiders as the photograph that caused the temporary cancellation of Kola Sami membership in the Sami Council in April 2022. The photograph in question, appearing on 11 April,<sup>7</sup> showed the Kola Sami politician who had served his period as a vice-chair of the Sami Council, playing a guitar with the sign Z on it. Later he explained that the guitar was handed to him at the start of the concert in Murmansk, after his own guitar “disappeared” on the way from Lovozero to Murmansk. In similarly aggressive symbolism, Sami reindeer sleds and traditional clothing were seen in videos of a flash mob supporting the Russian military operation in the Spring of 2022.

If and to what extent Indigenous individuals and organizations contributed to this production is not the question to be raised here (see Allemann, *this volume* – eds.). Rather it is about strategies of the state propaganda used in militarizing Indigenous identities and including Indigenous culture in the production of war. Another instance of appropriation of Indigenous culture for militarization purposes that involve women and girls are handicrafts. Propaganda channels note the production of Indigenous “souvenirs” in which the symbols associated with the current war, like the letters Z and V, the Russian flag, and Victory Day (9 May), are inscribed. Another post on VK from Winter 2024 showed schoolgirls in Murmansk being taught how to make simple handicraft items to give to the soldiers as “amulets.”<sup>8</sup> The “lesson” was seen as one of the activities celebrating International Sami Day on 6 February. The amulet represents a simple bear paw print, which, quoting the leader of one Sami *obshchina*, the publication describes as endowing its owner with iron will, self-confidence, and perseverance in achieving one’s goals. These examples illustrate how Indigenous men, women, and children are involved in, and exploited for Russian militarization. Propaganda, regional and local authorities, and Indigenous sympathizers use diverse cultural resources to reach, turn, and recruit as many people as possible. Alternatively, by reaching to various groups of people and popular cultural expressions, it aims to threaten, scare, and silence those, who do not comply with and carry out the government’s military agenda.

7 <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/sapmi/sameradet-stoppar-samarbete-med-ryssland> [accessed 17.07.2024]

8 See also <https://murmansk.er.ru/activity/news/oberegi-dlya-uchastnikov-specialnoj-voennoj-operacii-izgotovili-shkolniki-vmeste-s-tatyanoj-kusajko> [accessed 17.07.2024]



## Conclusion

Many challenges to anthropological work occur in the current situation of Russian war on Ukraine (and across the “collective West”). The most obvious are the restrictions on conventional field research methods, such as participant-observation, interviews, and visual documentation. Many anthropologists like me have begun to put more emphasis on “netnography,” textual analysis of media resources, and secondary data. Such sources have long been employed by anthropologists worldwide, particularly in the areas where site access is restricted. The current war in Ukraine and the repressive autocratic regime in Russia create specific challenges, both to the verification of data and analysis, as well as to the security of people and scholars, in Russia and abroad. Conventional ethical guidance for anthropological work cannot always help when we are to make appropriate decisions about how to protect people and knowledge.

Production of intense state propaganda, fake news, and conspiracy theories pose particular difficulties in the selection of truthful media sources and texts to use in any study. Most reliable sources become posts or references to media publications and discussion forums by the Sami and other Indigenous activists, and by colleague scholars, in Russia and émigrés, whom I know well and trust. The challenge then is how to distribute the authorship and credit sources, while not exposing individuals and organizations to risk. I believe anthropological knowledge about Indigenous people during the war provides invaluable, perhaps unique perspectives. It helps elevate Indigenous peoples’ significance and visibility in contrast to the limited international or domestic attention in the Russian opposition’s debates about the future of Russia. On the other hand, Russian Indigenous people are often presented in a negative light in the foreign media as “Putin’s soldiers” responsible for war crimes in Bucha and at other Ukrainian battlefields. Interruption in field work, even if in monitoring the sources, is thus not a solution. While I have no good solution to the problem, I resort here to a more generalized description and can only indirectly express my gratitude to those Indigenous people who have preserved me as their “friend” on social media platforms or who share their posts and keep in touch.

In this overview, I draw mainly on the ethnographic material collected between 2001 and 2017, which provides historical and regional context to contemporary processes discussed above. Many Sami women and men who are mentioned here have been my collaborators on prior research, others I have met or heard about in their communities. In the practice of anthropology, ethnography is commonly the focus of the analysis, while secondary data provide for contextual knowledge. The current situation of military conflict influences the analysis, since, in the absence of first-hand observation and direct communication, I might assume the meanings, attitudes, and positionalities that I can associate with the people and organizations from the past. Previous ethnographic knowledge is thus an important asset that makes my anthropological analysis of war-time Russia possible but also potentially biased.

Many of us, anthropologists of Siberia and the Russian North, have been puzzled by the contradictory information coming after the start of the war – of the Indigenous organizations’ letters of support to Putin, their involvement in propaganda production, volunteering for the army, of dead Indigenous soldiers, and of their military crimes. Anthropologists’ reactions to these phenomena are diverse and often emotional. Only “focused ethnography” can bring a deeper description and understanding of the diversity in responses and of Indigenous peoples’ involvement in militarization. Blaming Indigenous people at this point is just as problematic as looking for excuses in the economically marginalized and politically subjugated position of Russia’s Indigenous peoples. Looking for spaces for resistance of the Sami women in the Kola Peninsula situates this study closer to the latter category. At the same time, I am striving to avoid a patronizing gaze in “exonerating” Sami women, in discussing their agency in militarization pushed by the dominant state power, and in conceptualizing their resistance as being moved by solidarity with humanitarian and democratic values. Only future “on site” research may reveal the specific nuances and complexities in the intentions and power characteristics of the Sami women whose conditions have been framed by the war and by the society they are part of.

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## Figures

- 1 International project in support of the Sami community (*obshchina*) Puaz in the village of Loparskoe: visiting Norwegian Sami and sharing handicraft experiences. Photo: Vladislava Vladimirova, 2010.
- 2 Sami teacher and founder of the folklore groups “Voavskhess” and “Oirench,” Emilia Dobrynina. In the picture, she tells the author about her family history and memories. The interview is in collaboration with Lovozero Library’s project of collecting Sami family histories and genealogical trees. Photo: Vladislava Vladimirova, 2007.
- 3 An event at the Sami Centre in the village of Lovozero. On the stage, Sami veteran of labor, and reindeer herder, Vladimir Galkin, and Aleksandra Antonova, a Sami intellectual and the author of the Sami Cyrillic alphabet, receive tokens of respect. In 2012, Aleksandra Antonova received the Sami Women’s Forum prize Golegiella, for her contribution to preservation and development of the Sami language. Photo: Vladislava Vladimirova, 2007.
- 4 Concert hall in the House of Culture, the village of Lovozero. On 23 February, the village celebrates the “Day of the Defenders of the Fatherland.” Photo: Vladislava Vladimirova, 2003.
- 5 Concert in the House of Culture in the village of Lovozero as part of the May 9, Victory Day celebration. The Sami group Oiiar dances. Photo: Vladislava Vladimirova, 2002.