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3 ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES: THE SHIFTING "FOREFIELD" OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN RUSSIA FROM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

I decided to write about a topic of personal concern – not just for me, but surely for many colleagues and readers.[1] The consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine on ethnographic work and the future of Anthropology in and beyond Russia have been discussed repeatedly, not the least in the first two volumes of the book series *A Fractured North*. With the articles that have already been published, it is somehow easier and simultaneously more difficult to make a meaningful contribution to the debate.

I recollect a series of weekly or bi-weekly informal Zoom meetings which started immediately after the Russian invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 and continued for several weeks. It was an exchange among Siberianists, mostly from Western countries, and mostly in secure academic positions. Secure, yes indeed. As one participant remarked, why ask about the future of Siberian Studies when there is the much more immediate topic of Ukrainian refugees? Others were particularly concerned with the question of how to support Russian scholars at risk. Notwithstanding different takes on how to implement immediate support, there clearly was the need to talk about the loss of something very dear: transnational cooperation and access to the "field" in Russia. It was a moment of therapy, described similarly by Ekaterina Melnikova and Zinaida Vasilyeva shortly after, in their introduction to a collected volume: "[C]orrespondence with authors and discussion within the editorial board were simultaneously performance, therapy, and practice in maintaining the community, and a moment for expressing positions, when in another context we might have preferred to stay silent" (Melnikova and Vasilyeva 2024: 14).

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1 The manuscript of this chapter initially came into being upon the invitation to present in the lecture series of the Siberian Studies Seminar organized by Dmitriy Oparin (Passages) and Virginie Vaté (GSRL) at EPHE/GSRL, Campus Condorcet in Aubervilliers near Paris. I gave the lecture on 7 February 2024 and wish to express my gratitude to those who commented on the lecture and those who have read the manuscript in its various shapes, notably Nataliya Aluferova and Asya Karaseva. The comments of colleagues have been of utmost help; however, I retain the responsibility for subjective renderings and any factual flaws. *Academia Across the Borders*, edited by Yekaterina Melnikova and Zinaida Vasilyeva (2024) and the first two volumes of *A Fractured North* (Kasten, Krupnik and Fondahl 2024a, 2024b) provided much food for thought, for which I am very grateful.

In what follows, I will first consider my own experience of ethnographic fieldwork. The chronological order documents a shift in my understanding of how access to the "field" (*pole*) is facilitated. Drawing on what others have written about the "field," I then focus on the role of actors in the *predpol'e* or "forefield." Admittedly, the term carries militaristic connotations, attaining a gloomy meaning in the context of the ongoing war. Simultaneously, the term helps to highlight the hierarchical character of relations accompanying field research. It is this "forefield" that has shifted, with me ultimately now being an academic facilitator for others. I want to contribute to ongoing debates about the privilege of conducting research in far-away places and the hierarchical nature of such an ethnographic approach, defending the position that fieldwork in remote places has its justification and intrinsic value, as we can see now in a situation where it has become almost unthinkable. I conclude with a subjective view on the political and academic constellation, by the example of social anthropology at the University of Hamburg. The war has led to a significant transformation of how we perceive our academic networks, the purpose of our work as anthropologists, and the "field."

A personal account about several "fields" in Russia

I had the opportunity to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in several regions of Russia, which would have been impossible without the support of many people: within the communities where I happened to live, on the way there, and when returning.

Field N°1. As a student at the Department of Geography, Freie Universität Berlin, I took part in an excursion to Yakutsk in the summer of 1993 and then travelled on my own to Tura, the capital of Evenkiia, where I spent two weeks. I was not "sent" by anybody. Nobody had expected me to turn up. I relied on two or three names recommended by people I met on the train from Neriungri to Krasnoiarsk and the airplane from there to Tura. Upon arrival, I visited Nadezhda Kirillovna Kombagir (1926-2000), a regionally well-known Evenki teacher.[2] She was of course surprised, but I was not the first foreigner to consult her (cf. Bloch 2004). She knew how to handle unexpected visitors. The day after my arrival, she took me to the local administration (in her words, the *ispolkom*). In hindsight, it was perhaps impudent to think a young ethnographer might simply enter the Siberian "field" without following the academic and bureaucratic chain (*tsepochka*). But it was possible in those years. My strategy was also on purpose, following a slightly anarchistic and activist mood embraced by studying anthropology in Berlin in the early 1990s with the explicit aim

2 For Nadezhda Kirillovna Kombagir's biography see https://osiktakan.ru/poch_eao/poch_eao94.html?ysclid=m1lyevy17k562570668 [accessed 06.02.2025]. Author: anonymous, editor: Aleksandr Koval'.

to circumvent any form of hierarchy.[3] Luckily, no-one objected to my stay in Evenkiia. I returned to Tura in the summer of 1995 for another four weeks. During that visit, Altynai Ivanovna Pankagir (born 1969), a young member of the local Evenki intelligentsia, took interest and opened many doors. I was thus able to conduct extensive work in the local archive – admittedly, not quite the "classic" version of ethnographic fieldwork – on the process of making erstwhile nomads sedentary (Habeck 1998; see also Fondahl 1998). In contrast to my first stay, in 1995 I followed the chain of placement, having letters of reference with me. In addition, a week in Krasnoiarsk facilitated contact with several scholars, some of them working in the regional museum (*Krasnoiarskii kraevoi kraevedcheskii muzei*). The lesson I learnt was that, rather than circumventing regional experts and bureaucracy, it was apposite to engage with them, and it helped secure the role of the trustworthy student-ethnographer as perceived by the regional authorities. This experience resonates with the – back then, very palpable – contrast in Post-Soviet *vs* Western styles of ethnographic research (Gray, Schweitzer and Vakhtin 2003), as briefly sketched out further below.

Field N°2. As a doctoral student of Piers Vitebsky since 1997, I initially planned to study reindeer herders in Central Siberia, intending to travel to Evenkiia again. However, an unexpected opportunity arose to do such research on a solid financial basis in a different part of Russia: Tim Ingold hired me as research assistant for an EU-funded research project with the acronym TUNDRA (1998-2000). Through that project, academic ties and pathways into the "field" were already established: thanks to colleagues at the Institute of Biology, Komi Research Centre of the Ural Division of the Russian Academy of Sciences, letters of reference opened doors to *sovkhoz* and *kolkhoz* administrations along the border of the Komi Republic with the Nenets Autonomous Okrug. However, it was some kind of providence that in the village of Novikbozh I met one elderly woman, Elena Borisovna Khatanzeiskaia (c. 1955-2003), who upon my arrival in October 1998 claimed she had known that I was coming to this community – even before I knew I would! Long story short: without her, it would have been much harder to gain the

Fig. 1 First experience of ethnographic fieldwork: a conical tent (*chum*) next to a wooden house in Kislokan, Evenkiia, 1995.

3 In the early 1990s, many of the small but growing assemblage of students interested in Siberia at the Institute of Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin were involved in Action Anthropology; see Dudeck (2000; and in this volume). I want to express my deep gratitude to Erich Kasten for the support and respect that he gave to me and others in the same group in those years when Siberia as a "field" re-opened.

support necessary for joining the reindeer-herding brigades of the *sovkhoz Ust'-Usinskii* (see Habeck 2005). The eleven months of this ethnographic research were interspersed with short visits to colleagues at universities and research institutes in Russia, Finland, and Estonia (also because of the necessity to obtain a new visa for Russia). Of the entire period, the four months in the tundra were most intense. I took on the role of apprentice herder – not unlike the young folks undergoing the same kind of instruction from the head of brigade, Vasilii Mitrofanovich Khatanzeiskii (born 1953), who arguably took some pride in his didactic experiment of introducing a foreigner to reindeer herding. Living with the reindeer herders was not always easy for me. Some of them simply did not want to talk very much. It was not just me who felt that life in the tundra can be physically quite demanding: other tent inmates too found it challenging. In this Komi-speaking reindeer-herding brigade, the work ethos contained some attitude of struggling against the elements, notwithstanding notions of freedom and enskilment (Habeck 2006). This "field" was sometimes also challenging emotionally: if conflicts arose, one could not simply leave the tent community and walk away.

Fig. 2 Physically and emotionally intense ethnographic fieldwork: the reindeer-herding brigade N°10 of Ust'-Usinskii must cross a tundra river near Konkover during the snow-melt period, with everyone hoping that the sledges with household items will not turn upside down, 1999.

While in the village, it was easier to find refuge. I witnessed members of the village community seeking to define and fine-tune my social role and potential function (see Dudeck 2013: 90–110). Ultimately, however, this process of integration failed:

I returned twice to Novikbozh in later years and in the framework of a follow-up research project (SPICE), but after the death of Elena Khatanzeiskaia, things were no longer what they used to be. Younger relatives were occupied with sorting out their lives in places elsewhere.[4] From hindsight, I believe that people in the village could not decide what to make of me, which gradually led to waning contact and growing distance. Since the mid-2000s, I have had almost no personal contacts to people in the Komi reindeer-herding villages.

All these comings and goings occurred in the wider constellation of places and people that surround the "field" – in this case, academic colleagues in Helsinki, St. Petersburg, and Syktyvkar. With many of these and to varying degrees, I continue to be in contact, for example with Kirill Istomin, a scientist from the Komi Republic, now a colleague working part-time at the University of Hamburg, my home institution since 2014.

Field N°3. Not only do ethnographers have ambitions regarding where to go and what to do; not only do close-knit rural communities try to fathom what the incoming anthropologist can be good for; but large parts of society also have some idea about what ethnography is concerned with. In the context of Russia, the assumption that ethnographers should study *traditional* culture is widespread (which was problematic for me, as I sought to study *contemporary* social dynamics). But rather than trying to circumvent these expectations, it sometimes makes sense to start from exactly those organisations that are deemed legitimate as workspaces for anthropologists. During my time as coordinator of the Siberian Studies Centre at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, team members developed the idea to study the House of Culture (*dom kul'tury*) in different locations of Siberia. To almost every interlocutor in Russia, this made immediate sense because the House of Culture is where traditional culture is supposed to be – that is, where it is publicly performed. My research site within this comparative project was the city of Novosibirsk and the near-by small town of Kolyvan' (2005-2008), and I spent many visits to this region also in later years. This "field" had a very different feel from the previous one, first and foremost because my interlocutors – themselves experts in staged performances – exerted a sense of cheerfulness and openness, even in the face of the vacillating everyday conditions and challenges of their work (Donahoe and Habeck, eds. 2011). More than before, the mechanism of moving along the chain of academic and administrative hierarchies was a conscious strategy and simultaneously a necessity: I was *placed* by the Novosibirsk regional authorities into a particular House of Culture, one which fared better than others and thus could serve as an exemplary case. Again, I could utilise formal and informal ties, kindly provided by academic colleagues in Novosibirsk.

4 Additionally, there may have been rumours in the village that I would not qualify for marital match making.

Beyond that, I found the social-scientific community of Novosibirsk's suburb Akademgorodok particularly vibrant, up to the point of feeling completely immersed in a circle of friends and peers. More than before, the boundary between the "field," the "forefield," and "home" came to be blurred.[5] Simultaneously, it was the research project on the House of Culture that showed, more than before, the trend towards patriotic education that percolated from Moscow ministries into local programmes of cultural work, very much in line with growing conservatism and Russia politically distancing itself from western countries. This also became obvious during subsequent years, when another team of researchers from the Max Planck Institute conducted a comparative study on the conditions and limitations of lifestyle plurality in different regions of Russia (2008-2013, see Habeck, ed. 2019). For me these years yielded shorter periods of field research, more obligations "back home" in Halle, more visits to anthropological institutes in the metropolises of Russia, and frequent participation in conferences where I communicated with fellow scholars not so much about any particular ethnographic "field" and the pertinent logistics, but rather on theoretical aspects and the history and future of anthropology. Notwithstanding the conservative trend in Russian society, I remember the period from 2003 to 2014 as one of intensive dialogue and constant, multi-directional exchange. This decade also meant working at the Max Planck Institute closely together with roughly a dozen of scholars who had grown up in Russia (or elsewhere in the Soviet Union).[6] Thus, the institute itself attained many of the features that I have described as "forefield" – features to which I will return below – with me becoming part of it: in my function as coordinator, I came to be one of the academic facilitators ("gatekeepers") for junior anthropologists hoping to do ethnographic research in Russia.

My professorship at the University of Hamburg (since 2014) meant right from the beginning more teaching, less fieldwork, and less regional focus on Russia, for various reasons beyond the scope of this chapter. Over the years, however, several colleagues from Russia, senior and junior researchers, came as guests or stipend holders to Hamburg, contributing to the maintenance of academic and personal ties, particularly so

5 Trying to mention the names of those in and around Novosibirsk to whom I am indebted to would create a long, long list. Tatiana Barchunova stands out as one of my oldest friends, as co-teacher in seminars and co-author. I also fondly remember Lena Stoilik and Oksana Rupp, working at the House of Culture in Kolyvan', for their relentless energy and unwavering optimism. With the professional photographers Mikhail Vaneev and Sergei Tarasov, I conducted a photo excursion in and around Novosibirsk in 2014. Photographs by the former adorn the walls of my flat. A photograph of the latter decorates the wall of a seminar room at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Hamburg. My PhD supervisor, Piers Vitebsky, visited me in Novosibirsk-Akademgorodok in 2006. I also pay homage to Christian Buchner, one of my students, who started navigating the imponderables of the Ob' Sea (Obskoe More) near Akademgorodok and many other places in Siberia in 2014.

6 See the annual reports of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, notably 2004 to 2013, at https://www.eth.mpg.de/2923287/institute_reports [accessed 06.02.2025].

with Yakutsk and the Republic of Sakha, thanks to the support of the DAAD Ulla Johansen Scholarship programme.[7] Nonetheless, a gradual estrangement from the habit of conducting ethnographic research in Russia did occur.[8] New prospects emerged with the successful application for a research project on reindeer herding and biodiversity, to which I will turn now.

Fig. 3 Oksana Rupp (left) and Lena Stoilik (right) performing at a ceremony for inaugurating a newly built house in Kolyvan' near Novosibirsk, 2006.

Field lost – fieldless? In 2019, I became involved in CHARTER, which is the acronym for a project entitled "Drivers and Feedbacks of Changes in Arctic Terrestrial Biodiversity." Funded by the European Commission grant N° 869471, the project had its launch in the summer of 2020. The lockdowns ensuing from the COVID pandemic thwarted plans for travelling during that year and well into 2021: field research for CHARTER had to be postponed. Nonetheless, I looked forward to returning to the tundra areas of northern Russia, resuming ethnographic research on reindeer herding. The plan was to visit Yamal in March 2022 jointly with Roza Laptander, Bruce Forbes, Timo Kumpula, and others. Visas for non-Russian researchers had been obtained; accommodation had been organized. But this journey was not to happen (see Laptander, Forbes and Kumpula 2024). In fact, we cancelled the journey a few days before 24 February, interpreting the conspicuous silence of the regional authorities and gatekeepers as an omen of us being not particularly welcome. The chain (*tsepochka*) had stopped working, for us and many others.

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7 Ulla Johansen (1927-2021), the first female professor in West German anthropology, and well-known in Siberian Studies in Germany in the second half of the 20th century, dedicated part of her income and legacy to a DAAD scholarship named after her. Along this line of funding, by now half a dozen of young anthropologists from Sakha-Yakutia or with Sakha background have been able to stay for several months at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Hamburg, where Ulla Johansen's academic career started in the 1950s. Galina Belolyubskaya was the first to take this opportunity, though back then staying in Halle, not Hamburg. I co-published with her and later with Aital Yakovlev, a colleague from Yakutsk. See https://www.daad-stiftung.de/foerderprojekte/aktuelle-foerderungen/en/33072-ulla-johansen-scholarship/ [accessed 06.02.2025].

8 After two short stays in Yakutsk (2014 and 2015), my field research shifted to the Polish-German border region (2016-2019). With Agnieszka Halemba, a former Siberianist, we conducted a laboratory for anthropology students from Warsaw and Hamburg. Meanwhile, prospects for conducting research in Russia grew dimmer. Selecting Pomerania as a research site was due to practical considerations but also in view of having an alternative to ethnographic research in Russia, it seems to me from hindsight.

A few days after Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine, the University of Hamburg, along with all other academic institutions in Germany, prohibited business trips to Russia and cancelled all formal cooperation with institutional partners in Russia. Having said that, for me personally it was clear that I would not travel anymore to Russia under political leadership of Putin or his allies. Others see this differently, and I cannot judge them for that. Some PhD students and senior colleagues from Western countries have continued to travel to Russia for conference participation or ethnographic research, relying on the personal contacts they had been building up over years. But clearly, the shock of severed relations and waning opportunities for conducting research in Russia has affected the international community of Siberianists – a closure that gave rise to this and the preceding volumes of *A Fractured North*.

What is the "field" anyhow? And whom do we meet on the way there and back?

To conduct ethnographic fieldwork in several regions of Russia was a privilege, but not without constraints and mutual responsibilities. Of course, it was a privilege to have a German passport. However, I remember the procedures in the 1990s of applying for a visa and standing for hours in front of the Russian Embassy in Berlin. Being students, we had a limited budget and could not go through any company that would alleviate the procedure. I remember the Russian Embassy in Berlin as a fortress – it was hard to get in.[9] This brings me to the notion of the "field" as a place of destination – and yes: desire – and the "forefield" as those constraints and opportunities to be faced and negotiated along the way to the "field". Sometimes a closure, sometimes an opening.

It is hard to do justice to the many voices and publications that have pondered on the notion of "field" and "fieldwork" in anthropology. Focussing on Russia, one of the most recent debates on this topic took place in the journal *Antropologicheskii Forum*, which devoted its issue 48 (2021) to the "Dangers of the Field: the researcher's perspective" (*Opasnosti polia: perspektiva issledovatelia*), with ten authors contributing to the discussion (Voz'ianov et al. 2021). Several earlier events also investigated the multiple meanings of the "field." Some readers may remember the workshop "Russian Field: a view from abroad", 28-31 May 2009, in St. Petersburg. Among the many intriguing abstracts, one was audaciously poetic. It was submitted by Sarah Carton de Grammont, a scholar based in Paris/Nanterre:

> I thought I would write about Moscow. I am writing about Russia. I thought I would write about Russia. I am writing about me and you (*pro nas s vami*). I thought that

9 I am reminded by one of the reviewers that Russian citizens applying for German visa underwent similar difficulties, standing for many hours in front of the embassy. The atmosphere of fortification was thus a mutual experience.

> I more or less know what anthropology is. But I found out that anthropology is simply that what we call anthropology. I wanted my dissertation to be useful for something. Now I wish my dissertation served, among other things, to ensure that there are worthless things and deeds. Russian *poliushko-pole*, [how] large is the field: ethnographers, don't cry! Moving across the field are [you] anti-heroes… Oh, anti-heroes of ethnography! *Poliushko-pole*-is-it-a-large-field? Without doubt, it widens the horizon… (Carton de Grammont 2009, translation JOH).

With this allegoric statement, Carton de Grammont refers to a well-known belligerent song written by Viktor Gusev in 1933, notably to its first and last stanza.[10]

Полюшко-поле	*Poliushko-pole*
Полюшко, широко поле	*Poliushko*, large is the field
Едут по полю герои	Heroes move across the field
Эх, да Красной Армии герои!	Oh, heroes of the Red Army!

The depiction of ethnographers as anti-heroes would deserve a closer analysis, being a complex issue in itself to which I hope to contribute in the future (Abdel Fattah et al. 2020; Douglas-Jones et al. 2020; Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020; Yates Doerr 2020). However, what do we make of the above connotation of the (ethnographic) "field" with warfare?[11] For sure, the word "field" has a military connotation – in English as well as in Russian, German (*Feld* in *Feldforschung*) or French (*terrain* in *enquête de terrain*). This connotation constitutes a part of what makes many social anthropologists doubtful and nervous about the ethical aspects of their work. Such martial metaphors imply that there is something to be obtained "out there," in somewhat unknown terrain and arguably at some cost. The field is thus depicted as confrontation with some "other," and it is this notion that has been scrutinized in critical assessments of "othering" as a method (e.g., Chahine 2024; Fabian 2006; Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

When thinking about the way I personally experienced the relation between those that I met during "field research" and those in academia and administration, I came up – departing from the Russian word *pole* – with the concept of *predpol'e*, or in literal translation, the forefield.[12] A German equivalent may be the word *Glacis*, which itself

10 English renditions of the song's title are "Song of the Plains" and "Cavalry of the Steppes." The Russian version of this song can be found at https://www.culture.ru/poems/18423/polyushko-pole [accessed 06.02.2025].

11 I remember how Richard Rottenburg, then professor in Halle, occasionally conveyed this connotation in one of his seminars in the early 2000s. It is commonly held that ethnology and anthropology adapted the idea of "field" and "fieldwork" from natural history (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 6; see also Vermeulen 2015). While the "heroic" image of ethnographic fieldwork has been problematised frequently (see references in the main text), the military connotations of "field" are still underexplored.

12 Some colleagues whose mother tongue is Russian indicated their doubts about the existence of

is borrowed from French *glacis*. It is that what surrounds (a fortification). For illustration, let's turn to fortification architecture.

Figure 4 provides an example from the Netherlands: the fortification of Bourtange, founded in the late 16th century and attaining its largest extent in the mid-18th century (Heijligenberg and Overdiep 1967). In the strict sense, the *glacis* or *predpol'e* consists of those artificial slopes at the outer side of the fortification, hampering as much as possible the entry (or invasion) of anyone trying to get access. In a somewhat wider application of the term, other areas may be included, notably those stretches of land that can be easily surveyed by the watchguards – for that reason, trees and houses inhibiting surveillance from within the fortification ought to be removed. The photograph metaphorically shows the gates and bridges that (hopefully) lead to destination, and the community that will (hopefully) host the ethnographer. It is not by coincidence that the gateways are staggered and slightly exert the impression of a labyrinth. Step by step, an ethnographer ought to obtain access to the "field," guarded by several gatekeepers.

Fig. 4 Bourtange near Groningen, Netherlands, as of summer 2007.

True, this metaphor has limited explanatory value and is not without contradictions. Which present-day anthropologist would want to describe the way they access the "field" and return "home" afterwards in military terms? Where are the people? Moreover, the photo shows a stronghold which is surrounded by the *predpol'e*, whereas the "field," or rather the *fields*, are located at the margins, not in the centre. Many colleagues would say academia itself is a stronghold, and we should be concerned with its margins, with those who have limited access, or no access at all to the centres of academia.

the word. However, there is evidence of usage, e.g., https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Предполье [accessed 06.02.2025].

For the moment, let me stick to the metaphor, expand a bit on it, and ultimately problematise it. In line with this metaphor, for me the *predpol'e* comprised contacts that would hopefully facilitate access to certain locations in the actual "field" (*pole*). Such means of getting access to the "field" were of crucial importance, I believe, for any one researcher coming from a Western country to Russia – in Soviet times, but also in subsequent decades. The way from home to the "field" required passing several relay stations, or staging posts, and sometimes this literally involved changing the means of transport. I must admit that in my younger years, eager to get to the "real" field, I had the somewhat myopic impression that the individuals at these relay stations simply fulfilled the role of "gatekeepers". Indeed, some of them appeared to have no other function than controlling movements: to let pass, prevent access, or secretly monitor movements. Others, however, turned out to have a much broader agenda, geared towards reciprocity. Some of my interlocutors facilitated access to the field technically; but more pivotally, there were academic actors who helped me achieve my goal (even though not always) by activating their personal contacts, issuing *khodataistva* and other formal letters, helping with paperwork, and so on. Rather than being "gatekeepers," many of these actors became travel companions, hosts, and friends. It turned out that the majority of these contacts were sincere in their support, sincere in their interest in my intentions and goals, and sincere in their willingness to discuss theoretical as well as empirical questions. Located in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and the cities along the itinerary to the Far North of Russia (such as Krasnoiarsk and Syktyvkar), these older and younger colleagues thus provided intellectually and emotionally significant support. The same was true in those moments when I re-emerged from "the field."

To be sure, some of my perceptions were rather naïve (the above account of my earliest field research occasions testifies to that). We are all aware of the different resources and divergent positions that characterized ethnographic work in the Russian North and Siberia in the 1990s and into the 2000s. Researchers from the West had money – well, most of them – and were eager to conduct fieldwork; researchers in Russia usually had lesser financial resources, and were sometimes pushed into the iffy role of "facilitating" research projects designed by colleagues abroad. These asymmetric relations have been described by Patty Gray, Peter Schweitzer and Nikolai Vakhtin (2003).

Predpol'e can also take the notion of *interim* field. I use the word *interim* here because it captures well my short stays in places such as Rovaniemi, Helsinki, or Tartu, when I had to leave Russia for a couple of days to renew my visa. Further, one may see the *predpol'e* as interim field also in the sense of logistics and short-term breaks from participant observation: the busy atmosphere in the reindeer herders' tent made it difficult to write fieldnotes, and it would have been impossible to write at night. When visiting the village or towns a bit farther away, shopping (occasionally also for others) and having photographs printed were regular tasks. I could take food and the

printouts back to the village and tundra. Travelling between the reindeer herders' tent and the village depended mostly on *sovkhoz* employees, who in that sense also acted as "gatekeepers" and "facilitators."[13]

In a way, some conferences also felt a bit like "forefield," for they provided a liminal space: they enabled direct contact and informal exchange opportunities with those scholars and colleagues that would usually live and work in the cities *en route* to the "field" or from the "field." When travelling from Halle to conferences in Russia, I felt reminded of my apprenticeship in the tundra and of my socialization in Russia more generally. Moreover, it was good to be immersed in Russian language. But then, the same could be said about Halle itself (as indicated above) due to the presence of so many Siberianists and their family members, with whom conversation took place mostly in Russian. Admittedly, then, the notion of forefield, post-field, around-the-field and so forth becomes so vast that it basically covers anything and everything between the field "proper" on the one hand and "home" on the other. However, I do think that the "field" and the "forefield" are real and palpable. This became clear by their sudden absence: with the COVID pandemic of 2019-2021, the "field" came to be out of reach. Communication with people in different places in Russia was technically possibl, but it focussed, of course, on the pandemic itself. A shared experience, lived out differently in different places and in isolation from each other.[14]

Fieldwork does me no longer

Many others have written about the conundrums and dilemmas of ethnographic field research before. The preceding personal account and interpretation of "field" and "forefield" are not dissimilar to what Bob Simpson, emeritus anthropologist at Durham University, discussed in a text entitled "You don't do fieldwork, fieldwork does you" (2006). Drawing on his research experience in two very different social settings in Sri Lanka, in the late 1970s and the early 2000s, he showed how the power-knowledge

13 One of the reviewers of this manuscript remarked that the notions of "field" and "forefield" seem to collapse: where to draw the border? In response to this comment: I did perceive a difference between the tundra as the core of my ethnographic study and the village, which constituted a related, but easier-to-access domain. To be accepted as temporary member of the reindeer-herding community in the tundra, I had to acquire trust and help from among those who controlled transport between village and tundra, notably the director, the head of the reindeer-herding department, and the head zootechnician of Ust'-Usinskii.

14 I recollect that two fellow anthropologists, Aitalina Ivanova and Florian Stammler, spent most of the time of the pandemic in Yamal Peninsula. As they noted: "Herders' opinions on the lockdown by order from above revealed how any restriction on movement is seen to attack the heart of Nenets nomadic life. In response, the herders voluntarily applied traditional disaster management strategies to Covid-19: they 'abstained from presence' by avoiding going to settlements […]" (Stammler and Ivanova 2020:12). This is an example of how communities in the North themselves may decide to control and reduce the gateways.

nexus came to the fore very clearly in his research. As also noticed by Stephan Dudeck (2013: 90–110) in the context of western Siberia, Simpson (2006: 126) pointed to the fact that members of the host community need to emplace the incoming scientist, stressing that moving along the links within a given social network generates knowledge but simultaneously entails closures, making it impossible to immerse in other social networks existing and competing in the same space. Simpson also addressed the question of temporality and ageing, as becomes explicit in his conclusion:

> The long, intense and physically arduous immersion in a rural community I undertook in my early 20s as an unencumbered single man is very different from the accelerated, short bursts of fieldwork I undertook in my 40s in the relative comfort of downtown Colombo and in regular telephone and e-mail contact with wife and children. In the former, I had a strong sense of being "far away" and "inside" a clearly identified field. In the latter, the 'field' metaphor was hardly appropriate as I was researching networks which were, in communication terms, "close" and of which I was, as an academic, in some senses already a part. (Simpson 2006: 135)

Up to this point, many of my above observations may sound familiar; but the Covid pandemic marked a moment of disruption, with hopes for a return to "normalcy" being even more thwarted by the events of February 2022. And by that, the notion of "forefield" has become complicated in recent years. Gates are shut – not only gates in the spatial sense, in the sense of access to field sites, but also the discursive frames seem very narrow these days, by which I mean academic writing and self-censorship. To quote Dmitriy Arzyutov: "even those few of us who visit the 'field' nowadays will hardly be able to publish texts in Russian on militarism or protests, corruption and nepotism, violence and persecution of LGBTQ+ people" (2024: 25). He also spoke of "the reality of the physical (outer) and discursive (inner) closure of the 'field'…" (ibid.). I can very much connect with Arzyutov's words. Many years of collectively establishing the groundwork for anthropological research on gendered and queer perspectives in northern peripheral communities of Russia (e.g., Povoroznyuk, Habeck and Vaté 2010; Dudeck and Habeck 2021) seem entirely pointless now – perhaps not anathematic, but simply unfeasible.[15]

True, some colleagues continue to move across the border. Some of them find a comparatively "safe" space in the study of culture and cultural legacy (Sikora 2024), co-creating topical research with regional scholars. To some extent, this is a discursive return to *kul'tura* as a domain apparently free of politics. The issues of outer and inner closure of the Russian "field" were discussed in public on 23 September 2024, during two workshops of the 4th Vienna Anthropology Days (VANDA).[16] Even though I

15 Surprisingly, the text "Prolegomena for a Programme on Anthropological Gender Studies in the Russian North" is still online (Dudeck and Habeck 2021). It is a period piece that may soon vanish.

16 https://vanda.univie.ac.at/scientific-program/ [accessed 06.02.2025].

could not attend VANDA, self-reflection but also polarisation become evident from the workshop descriptions (Funk 2024; Krist et al. 2024). Dmitry Funk, criticized by others for his position in response to the February 2022 events, spoke in Vienna about a "velvet glove tyranny" – also in western countries, where researchers are now forced to declare whose side they are on. I contend, however, that this political polarization has occurred exactly because part of Russia's anthropological community has been silenced and ousted from their home country. From my perspective of present-day Russian academia, it is not only the range of topics to be studied which is changing, but the style of conducting research and presenting one's findings. Emphasis on patriotism has moved to centre stage.

In line with that ideological shift in Russian academia, a hard-to-determine number of anthropologists have left Russia. Not all of them left directly after 24 February 2022: some had attained positions or scholarships before Russia's attack on Ukraine and then decided not to return to Russia; for others, the balance of push-and-pull factors tipped in September 2022, with partial mobilisation in Russia. Older colleagues in St. Petersburg and Moscow hold onto their positions (which I deem understandable) whereas younger anthropologists seem more prone to leave Russia. Some of the erstwhile academic "facilitators" that I met in Syktyvkar, Novosibirsk or Yakutsk have relocated to Canada, the United States, Britain, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Poland, France, Austria, and Germany. By the time of writing, a sizeable community of anthropologists from Russia now live in western countries. Having said that, I wonder to what degree it is legitimate to speak about a community, and to what degree those who have left Russia over the last two to four years perceive themselves as members of a specific community, or rather of the transnational academic discipline of anthropology.

To return one last time to fortification metaphors, the *glacis*, the slopes, and embankments are now right here, in the city where I live. Hamburg for me has become a *faubourg* of anthropology in and of Russia. Half a dozen colleagues, some younger and some older, now live more or less permanently in Hamburg. Each would have to tell their own story of how and why, along with the complexities of arranging everyday life and social relations in between and across state borders and ideological rifts. Other scholars spend three to six months in Germany as DAAD Ulla Johansen stipend holders (see footnote 7). This is one of the few remaining links of organizational funding for researchers from Russia, specifically from Sakha, intending to come to Germany. Colleagues who themselves arrived from Russia in earlier years spend significant time on integrating those newly arriving. Summing up my personal experience, the city of Hamburg and its university now feel "more" Russian, Sakha, Nenets, Komi to me than they used to do five years ago. Yet it is a different kind of immersion, not 24/7 but mainly during office hours. Additionally, owing to my position I am now much more of an academic facilitator. But I operate in this "forefield" together with colleagues without whose help this would be hardly possible. It is more than apposite

to thank my colleagues for that. We are on the way to creating a scholarly community, and at some point there were thoughts about to what degree we live in a protected space – not a discursive "safe space," but one that is free of distrust and undercover investigation. This occasionally also requires some gatekeeping.

Others in this volume of *A Fractured North* have written about responsibility and sustained contact between any one anthropologist and their interlocutors in the "field". While I feel responsible for a group of colleagues who now work at the same institution, I must admit that I have lost contact with almost everyone who still lives in Russia. By that I mean my non-academic interlocutors of previous decades and in various field research settings. As to the House of Culture Project, one of my informants has moved to Switzerland, and we stay in contact. Not so with many other former friends – the many thorny topics and potential disputes about politics make me feel tired and frustrated. The House of Culture workers with whom I was emotionally so strongly connected in the early 2000s take part willy-nilly in all the military-patriotic education and pretend it is not they who are responsible for politics in Russia: they say it is all being governed "from above." I find it hard to continue conversation with them. This is one of the major goals of ideological brainwashing – it alienates people who used to be friends. I do not claim it is a one-sided process: the practice of "othering" people just because of their Russian citizenship has been proliferating in German society, as I have witnessed over the last couple of years.

Conclusion

Fieldwork is a privilege and a challenge. I have been affected by encounters with others, who have been affected by encounters with me. Fieldwork entails power differentials, but so does the end of fieldwork. I defend the idea that long-term field research in a setting culturally and/or spatially distant from one's everyday life has subversive and uplifting power: to enable mutual understanding as well as debate, document the diversity of ways of life, support fights against exclusion and marginalization, and contribute to the discipline of Anthropology, which – notwithstanding its being "disciplined" in one way or the other – makes us draw attention to the undisciplined, unexpected and surprising aspects of life. The idea of the lone and heroic ethnographer arduously chiselling out "truth" in a far-flung location has been rightfully criticized by Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe (2020), and by others before. It is a myth, and it was a myth well kept in the history of ethnography. Field research is choreography and discord alike, shaped by path dependencies and, simultaneously, hard-to-predict entanglements. "You don't do fieldwork, fieldwork does you" (Simpson 2006).

Sometimes when asleep, my dreams make me see myself in one of the previous "fields" in Russia. Most of these dreams gradually transit into uncomfortable situa-

tions. From that I learn that I am severed from those sites and people, that I want to go to Russia again, but this would be not without challenges – surely, much bigger challenges than in earlier life, and I am not ready to take these. Having said that, I am happy to be object of field research – that is, me and people I bond with as a "field" to be researched by others, regardless of their background. It will be, as it was, a negotiation of the motives behind the fieldwork.

Remote sensing is the basis for some of the data collected in the CHARTER Project, of which I am a team member. I am now looking at satellite imagery of those places which I visited as apprentice reindeer herder. For myself, the "field" has turned into memories and can be accessed only by photographs, fieldnotes, or remote sensing (Figure 5). What comes to mind is a remark by anthropologist Dmitry Baranov (2024: 32), who spoke about "sensory deprivation", which is caused by not-being-there: in his case, scientific conferences, in my case, "ground-truthing" with people in the tundra.

In using the notions of field and forefield – *pole* and *predpol'e* – I have pointed out the many stageposts and hierarchical relationships that shape the dynamics of ethnographic research. For me and for many others, Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly transformed these relationships. On these grounds, but also because of my secure academic position as a professor, I now see myself less as a fieldworker and more as a gatekeeper, facilitating access and occasionally providing "shelter" for others. Thus, I now interpret the conditions of anthropological work in a much more defensive light than I used to do during previous decades. Ultimately, such change in perception is one of the many grave consequences of growing geopolitical tensions and academic polarization.

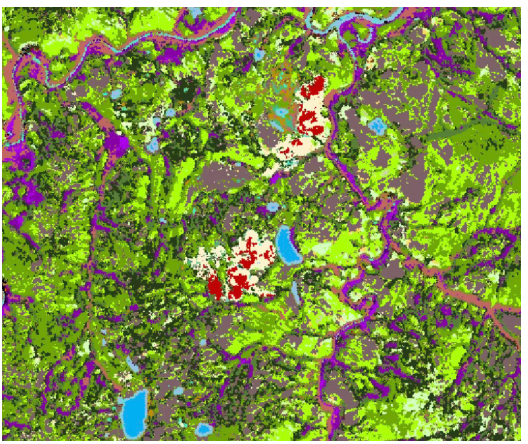

Fig. 5 Landcover classification by remote sensing: the map shows the area of Konkover, 58.77333°East, 67.30584°North, at the banks of River Kolva-Vis, which meanders through the top (northern) part of the image. Konkover is a place that I visited with reindeer herders in spring 1998; now it is memory. 2023.

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Figures

1 First experience of ethnographic fieldwork: a conical tent (*chum*) next to a wooden house in Kislokan, Evenkiia. Photo: Joachim Otto Habeck, 1995.

2 Physically and emotionally intense ethnographic fieldwork: the reindeer-herding brigade N°10 of Ust'-Usinskii must cross a tundra river near Konkover during the snow-melt period, with everyone hoping that the sledges with household items will not turn upside down. Photo: Joachim Otto Habeck, 1999.

3 Oksana Rupp (left) and Lena Stoilik (right) performing at a ceremony for inaugurating a newly built house in Kolyvan' near Novosibirsk. Photo: Joachim Otto Habeck, 2006.

4 Bourtange near Groningen, Netherlands, as of summer 2007. Licence: CC BY-SA 3.0 Unported. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Bourtange#/media/File:Luchtfoto_bourtange.jpg [accessed 06.02.2025].

5 Landcover classification by remote sensing: the map shows the area of Konkover, 58.77333°East, 67.30584°North, at the banks of River Kolva-Vis, which meanders through the top (northern) part of the image. Konkover is a place that I visited with reindeer herders in spring 1998; now it is memory. Image: Annett Bartsch and Helena Bergstedt, b.geos (www.bgeos.at), 17 November 2023.