Introduction: War and State among Ethnic Minorities in Russia

Author: Zbigniew Szmyt, Stephan Dudeck

S P E C I A L   I S S U E

INTRODUCTION: WAR AND STATE AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES IN RUSSIA

ZBIGNIEW SZMYT

ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POZNAŃ

STEPHAN DUDECK

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

This issue of Ethnologia Polona is devoted to the integration of ethnic diversity in Russian warfare from an anthropological perspective. This is our response to repeated references in public discourse to the participation of non-Russian peoples in the war. There are reports of a disproportionately high number of casualties being mourned in Russia among non-Russian peoples, but Western media also portrays non-Russian cultures as being the backbone of the Russian war effort. Stereotypes and prejudices regarding the lack of humanistic values among non-Russians are propagated, take, for example, an extreme but telling statement by Pope Francis (America Magazine 2022). This shows how distorted the perception of ethnic and cultural diversity is in relation to the war against Ukraine. One reason for this is certainly limited knowledge but perhaps also the insufficient depth and breadth of social science research carried out among non-Russian peoples. This includes such questions as the level of their integration into state war policy and propaganda, the role of ethnic diversity in Russian military operations and armed conflicts, as well as those concerning military mobilisation and ideology and the reaction of the non-Russian population to it. Compared to other geographical regions, especially North America, it is striking that the literature on Indigenous warfare and military culture and especially on participation in contemporary wars is relatively scarce (Sheffield and Riseman 2018, Gorter-Gronvik and Suprun 2000, Poyer 2022). This is all the more astonishing given the importance of the memory of the Second World War in public discourse and military propaganda inside Russia today. More recent armed conflicts, such as the war in Afghanistan, the wars in Chechnya and the war in Ukraine, are all placed in this context in public memory and, above all, in state propaganda.

In the last three years, some scholarly work on these issues has been produced, in particular by researchers with roots in Indigenous communities themselves. A section of five articles appeared in issue 25 of the journal "Inner Asia" in 2023 (Zhanaev and Jonutytė 2023, Yangulbaev 2023, Vyushkova and Sherkhonov 2023, Khovalyg 2023, Dolyaev and Dugar-DePonte 2023), followed by an article by Sayana Namsaraeva (2024) on the perception of war and war victims among the Buryats, published in the same journal a year later. Also in 2023, an article by Alexey Bessudnov (2023) analysed the disproportionate number of deaths among Indigenous soldiers from a demographic perspective. The Buryat researcher and anti-war activist Mariya Vyushkova presented her research on the participation of Indigenous minorities in the war and the disproportionate number of casualties at international conferences (Vyushkova 2024), with results confirmed by the observations on Chukotka made in Kerghitageen's article in the present *Ethnologia Polona* issue. This thematic issue of *Ethnologia Polona* corresponds with the aforementioned papers, as it also incorporates the voices of native researchers and activists. At the same time, the papers collected in this journal are written from a different temporal perspective – more than two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, we present a mix of perspectives by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers alike.

The Soviet Union existed for nearly 70 years, while the transitional period of political, economic and social change known as post-socialism has already lasted over 30 years. The inertia of the Soviet system, which hindered states and societies in their efforts to adapt to the market economy and democratic principles, has often provided the interpretive framework for understanding most of the processes taking place in the former Eastern Bloc countries (Buchowski 2021, 82–85; Cima and Sovová 2022). This framework has inadvertently perpetuated several Soviet state-building myths, such as the Soviet Union's radical break with the Russian Empire and the emancipatory, anti-colonial nature of the Soviet political project (Kravchenko 2015). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, followed by the full-scale war in 2022, revealed that imperialism — not socialism — is the most enduring element of Russian state ideology and social resentment. Russian military expansionism, which has victimised Georgia and Ukraine and politically and economically subjugated countries such as Belarus, has created a demand for a revision of scholarly perspectives over the past three decades. In recent years, post-socialist regions have increasingly embraced postcolonial theory and the idea of decolonisation.

The war has acted as a catalyst for political, theoretical and ideological transformations in the post-socialist space, also for ethnic and national minorities. As a result, a revision of the relationship between the Russian state and its ethnic minorities is necessary. Although the term "minority", whether ethnic, linguistic or cultural, is commonly used in both academic and legal documents, it is often uncritically generalised. The minority position is not simply given but created through the policies

of those in power. In many cases, borders have been drawn and population policies pursued in such a way that the Indigenous population has been put into the position of an ethnic minority position that often limits their collective agency and their opportunities for self-determination. Nevertheless, we and most of our authors have chosen to use the term "ethnic minority" in this issue to refer to the demographic and political situation created by colonial processes.

The new relations between the state and minorities are being shaped by the following five factors: (1) the significance of Indigenous soldiers in the war on Ukraine; (2) the unprecedented scale of political emigration among minority activists; (3) the formation of politically active diasporas connected through transnational and horizontal ties; (4) the introduction of decolonial vocabulary into the political discourse of the Russian opposition, with either an affirmative or dismissive intention; and (5) increased pressure on ethnic minorities to demonstrate loyalty to the Russian state and its imperial projects.

Two opposing developments in the sociopolitical fabric of ethnic minorities in Russia have become apparent since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022. On the one hand, pro-Kremlin elites within ethnic groups are demonstrating absolute loyalty to the central authorities, urging their compatriots to fight among the ranks of the Russian army and support the war effort, rallying around the figure of Putin and "demonstrating Russia's national unity". On the other hand, émigré politicians and activists have taken radically opposing positions, seeking to mobilise ethnic minorities politically around anti-war and decolonisation stances – including calls for the post-Putin break-up of Russia into independent national states. Thus, anti-war organisations comprising transnational networks of activists, which are key manifestations of counter-power (Graeber 2004), engage in discursive practices and strategies that oppose the military involvement of their compatriots in the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In contrast to pre-war ethnic activists, this new form of activism creates a network of horizontal relationships among ethnic minorities, realising their common interests and developing a common political agenda. This new phenomenon calls for urgent research to map the actors involved, to understand their demands and to analyse the practices and discursive strategies in which they engage. Given that transnational activism is a fundamental expression of grassroots counter-power and social resistance in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we argue that a proper recognition of the current networking processes, practices and discursive negotiations will be crucial for understanding the new social, political, environmental and cultural activism among ethnic minorities and the political landscape of a potential post-Putin Russia.

The war has shown that despite three decades of intensive research on and within Russia, there remains much to be understood about the mechanisms of power, the images of the state and the intricacies of hierarchies in the country. The ongoing

war initiated by Russia raises many research questions: What role does this war play in the life of Russian society? What makes it understandable, even acceptable for people in Russia? From an anthropological perspective, it is essential to ask how everyday life is shaped by state action and how the state is understood and experienced on the grassroots level. Contemporary anthropological studies focus on issues of political power and subordination, multiple forms of inequality, economic vulnerability, social discontent, colonisation and its effects, strategies of resistance, negotiation and cooperation in the face of different forms of domination (Yusupova 2023; Jonutytė 2023). There is a growing need for deeper reflection on the relationship between state power and citizenship, civil rights, economic inequality and exploitation, and strategies of resistance and adaptation, as well as the transformational processes of national, ethnic and civic identities, taking into account issues of intersectionality and different forms of social hierarchies (Zmyvalova 2022; 2023b; 2023a). Studies of the intersections of gender relations, especially masculinity, with ethnic diversity and centre-periphery relations remain a major desideratum. The impressive role that issues of gender, sexuality and reproduction have played in Russian propaganda during the war and the focus of state repression against activism supporting gender diversity and equality, makes research on Indigenous gender configurations, especially masculinities, and their transformation and mobilisation in Russia's war effort all the more necessary (Tarasova 2021; Dudeck and Habeck 2021; Habeck 2023).

The editors of this special issue therefore set themselves the task of inviting authors from social anthropology, who have experience conducting research with Indigenous peoples in Russia to publish their research and reflections on the topic. It turned out, however, that many potential authors, although knowledgeable about the subject, were unwilling to publish for a variety of reasons. We feel it is appropriate to discuss these reasons briefly and also in order to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the texts collected here represent only a small part of the production of knowledge and that our endeavour was inevitably of a provisional and fragmentary nature.

One of the most frequently cited reasons was the lack of opportunities for direct fieldwork and open, unhindered dialogue with those affected. For many colleagues, anthropological research seems legitimate when it focuses on a topic by exploring the motivations, conditions and potential actions of the actors directly, allowing the researcher to interact with research partners and experience the social context firsthand. Many researchers doubt that full-fledged anthropological research is possible solely based on the evaluation of information collected in the past, or via secondary sources and communication at a distance.

The second serious reason was the uncertainty of scientific judgement on morally charged issues, such as the guilt of surrounding violent deaths of people in acts of war, particularly in view of the fact that insights into social reality are fragmentary

and judgments may have to remain provisional, researchers are reluctant to pass judgment from a distance.

There is also the ethical question of whether the publication of scientific analyses could cause harm to those involved, even of a symbolic or political nature. Finally, there are the risks to researchers who, even if they are not conducting research in Russia, have important social ties there, often including relatives and close friends. Publications on the activities of ethnic activists pose a particular risk; on 26 July 2024, for example, the Russian Ministry of Justice added 55 ethnic activist organisations and foreign academic institutions to its list of extremist organisations. These organisations were described as structural divisions of what the Russian authorities termed the "anti-Russian separatist movement" (Bryant 2024). Any contact or cooperation with members of this alleged movement is automatically criminalised. Forms of repression, which can also affect family members in Russia, also make emigrants abroad very cautious.

Nevertheless, given the stereotypes prevalent in public discourse and the research desiderata mentioned above, we felt it was important and necessary to offer the authors a platform to publish their insights and reflections in a special issue of Ethnologia Polona. We have deliberately kept the topic relatively broad in order to shed light not only on the present but also on the past. We have not limited ourselves to Indigenous peoples or so-called Indigenous minorities, which in the Russian context again differentiates between numerically small and large peoples and also includes ethnic groups that have lived in Russia for centuries but do not count as Indigenous peoples according to international legal criteria. The authors willing to share their research, however preliminary or fragmentary, focused not only on the mobilisation for the war but also on related areas of relations between the state and "minorities" that were affected by the war. In the papers presented in this issue of Ethnologia Polona, various levels of anonymisation and pseudonymisation had to be applied to minimise the risk of revealing the identities of interlocutors and even authors who were in Russia or who were vulnerable to state repression or other risks to themselves or their relatives, even while located outside Russia. Decisions about the removal of context and representation are never easy in anthropological research, as they can also reduce the relevance of the analysis and its refutability. In the present-day situation, the risk to research participants was clear and self-censorship was inevitable. We ask the reader to bear in mind that in the current situation, not everyone can afford to have their voice heard and that even in academic discourse, much information remains between the lines.

It was only in the course of communication with the authors that it became clear how important it is to look at our research methodology and the possibility of researching and writing about this topic, especially in the field of social and cultural

anthropological research. The method of participant observation is and remains a central research tool, but it is challenged when the mobility of the researcher is constrained not only geographically but also in an epistemological sense. Most Western anthropologists who have conducted research with Indigenous peoples in Russia have lost access to their field for a variety of reasons (Melnikova and Vasilyeva 2024; Chudakova, Hartblay and Sidorkina 2024). Many Russian scholars, critical of the political regime have left the country. Those remaining in Russia face intense direct and indirect pressure to self-censor or to publicly endorse the country's military aggression. From this perspective, for reasons of research ethics, we neither wanted to nor could invite any authors affiliated with academic institutions related to the Russian state.

However, it was important to us to include Indigenous authors and, where possible, to open an internal perspective of Indigenous communities. This is not due to epistemological essentialism, but to the recognition that social ties to relatives and friends, as well as the experience of socialisation in Indigenous communities, allow for differentiated perspectives that remain closed even to well-informed outsiders. These perspectives are crucial in this particularly sensitive case given that the communities are exposed to false generalisations, stereotypes and stigmatisation from various sides.

Being cut off from direct face-to-face communication in the regions of Russia was a challenge for many authors. The papers included in this thematic issue present a wide range of alternative research methods: internet content analysis (netnography), online interviews with respondents in Russia, interviews with emigrants fleeing conscription in neighbouring states, fieldwork in diasporas and retrospective autoethnography. Access to social networks with chat functions, telephone communication and exchange and cooperation with people who have temporarily or permanently left the country, as well as the evaluation of various self-testimonies of members of the target groups on the internet are becoming new fields of field research. Whether these new forms of interaction and participation in everyday practices can replace traditional co-presence and face-to-face communication, and what methodological considerations they require, is currently the subject of much debate. What is certain is that they pose new challenges to anthropological research, not only from a methodological point of view but also in terms of research ethics. Another way out is to turn to research data from the past. This involves not only the traditional use of historical sources from publications and archives, but also working with often unarchived and private materials that have been left behind by past fieldwork conducted by the researchers themselves or, in some cases, by others, and whose potential has often been used only to a limited extent for research questions. The personal relationships, experiences and part-time socialisation of anthropological fieldworkers

in the social contexts of the research area, which accumulate over the course of their lives, have so far received little attention in fieldwork methodology. They extend beyond short-term research projects, are associated with ethical obligations that also arise from participant observation and influence the understanding of new questions and online data.

Given the extremely limited access to fieldwork, researchers' prior field experiences and long-established relationships with research partners willing to provide information from abroad, despite repression and state-sponsored hate propaganda against Ukraine and the Western world, have proven to be crucial. Thanks to creative methodology, the authors have managed to give voice to representatives of ethnic and national minorities living in Russia and in exile a voice that, in the realm of Russian isolation and the monopoly of state propaganda, often remains unheard. As editors, we hope that we have managed to avoid wishful thinking and the idealisation of minorities, presenting both the causes of pro-war positions and the motives for active participation in Russia's military efforts within some of the studied communities and the resistance strategies and political goals of anti-war activists.

Some of the authors, such as Panakova, Minakova and Nagy, take the abovementioned approach and analyse field research data and participant observation from the period before 2022. Others, such as Baranova, Hakkarainen and Zibrova, work with emigrants outside Russia. Szmyt and Kerghitageen, alternatively, use forms of netnography, whereas Peshkov bases his work solely on historical sources. Thus, the papers published in this issue shed light on these issues from historical and ethnographic perspectives. They present analyses of the interactions between ethnic minorities in Russia and the Russian state during wartime conflicts in the imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. The historical perspective combined with memory studies is represented by papers from Ivan Peshkov and Valeriya Minakova.

In his article, "The Power of the Unburied: Quasi-Indigenousness, Limited Citizenship and Collective Responsibility of Russians in Mongolia and China", Peshkov argues that the collective imagination of the Soviet people included three demonised frontier groups disloyal to Soviet power, playing an important role in border management instruments and disciplinary narratives: the Banderites in Ukraine, the Basmachi in Central Asia and the Transbaikal Cossacks – the so-called *Semyonovtsy*. Using the example of this last group, a quasi-Indigenous group of Cossacks from the Sino-Russian border, the author analyses the specificity of Soviet practices of suspicion that entrenched border populations in a perspective of inevitable political and racial contamination, as well as local counter-memories produced in response to Soviet memory.

The relationship of minority counter-memory to official state memory is also crucial to Minakova's paper "At the Crossroads of Memories: State, Regional and Individual Perspectives on the Russian-Caucasian War among Circassians in Adygea".

Minakova analyses the gradual suppression of the memory of the nineteenth-century Circassian genocide in Putin's Russia and its replacement by a narrative of unity among Russia's nations in the fight against an external enemy during the Great Patriotic War and, now, during the war with Ukraine. Juxtaposing this state loyalty memory with the uncompromising memory of genocide cultivated by the Circassian diasporas, Minakova posits a thesis about the anti-totalitarian political potential of minority diasporas, which could become centres of resistance to the regime and generators of change in the post-Putin Russia that many expect.

Kerghitageen and Jaroslava Panáková are the authors of two complementary papers on the reaction and involvement of Arctic communities in the war against Ukraine. Both try to explain the reasons why representatives of Indigenous ethnic minorities, including the Chukchi, decide to support and actively participate in the war. Kerghitageen's text, "Chukotka and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine", based mainly on internet sources, analyses local pro-war and mobilisation propaganda, support actions for soldiers from the region and local discussions about the war and conscripted soldiers from Chukotka. Panáková in her article, "Brothers Forever. Fraternal Ties and the Dynamics of Obligation in Arctic Russia", discusses how kinship and strong fraternal ties shape the decisions and behaviour of men in local communities, where closeness can be created through common work, hunting or joint activities. Panáková argues that the most common and emotionally deep fraternal bonds are local and rooted in two social institutions: the "hunting team" institution and the local kinship system. Meanwhile, local state institutions try to exploit the concepts of fraternity and extend them to the national level. Such a research orientation is particularly relevant given the paternalistic nature of state-minority relations in Russia. The author shows how principles of social organisation based on the concept of fraternity, positioning and obligations, which are key to the bonds between men, influence the decisions of Indigenous men about military service and participation in the war in Ukraine. The specificity of dependent relations based on local social relations and obligations, combined with ethnic hierarchies and the strategic distribution of resources and privileges, has unfortunately been too often neglected in anthropological research in the past.

Contributions by Vlada Baranova and Ekaterina Zibrova examine both active and passive forms of resistance to Russian aggression against Ukraine. Zibrova, in "Indigenous Peoples of Russia Against the War: Narrative Analysis of the Stages of Ethnic Identity as a Resource for Activism", analyses the activities of anti-war and decolonial activists from Indigenous ethnic minorities: Sakha, Kalmyk, Tuvan, Buryat, Chuvash, Bashkir and Tatar. Drawing on a series of interviews, Zibrova shows how anti-war activism is linked to the construction of ethnic identity and resistance to racism, discrimination and state oppression.

Baranova, in her article "Debate on Decoloniality and Sense of Belonging Among Young Kalmyks and Buryats Who Fled to Mongolia After 2022", analyses ways of understanding the war and relations with the state among Buryats and Kalmyks who emigrated to Mongolia to avoid conscription in September 2022. Using ethnographic material, it illustrates the process of forming an anti-colonial discourse in an emigrant environment – outside the control of Russian censorship and its repressive apparatus – as well as the transmission of decolonisation ideology to wider social masses. The selected case study also describes the integration process of activists among emigrants of different ethnic minorities who, through physical proximity, intense communication, joint activities and a sense of common destiny, create horizontal ties of cooperation that can generate new structures of political resistance.

Contributions by Marina Hakkarainen and Zoltán Nagy show how war affects social relations and people not directly involved in military action, demonstrating the destructive and pervasive impact of war and war rhetoric on everyday life in Russia. In her article "Mindful Body and Geopolitical Embodiment During the War Conflict Between Russia and Ukraine", Hakkarainen discusses the concept of "geopolitical embodiment" in relation to the war between Russia and Ukraine, using personal stories to highlight how individuals physically and emotionally experience geopolitical events. Hakkarainen examines how Russian citizens, particularly those who opposed the invasion, perceive and physically internalise the conflict. She introduces the idea of the "mindful body" and uses it to frame the ways in which people's bodies can represent broader geopolitical issues, reflecting personal histories, sentiments and social relations tied to nation-states. The article highlights the profound impact of the war on particular individuals, who report feelings of social fragmentation and physical illness, prompting some to leave Russia. Of course, the embodied forms of anxiety that plague the (former) residents of Russia cannot be equated with the scale of suffering and tragedy experienced by the citizens of Ukraine, who are being bombed and killed by Russian soldiers. Nevertheless, it is an important psychosocial phenomenon that has probably become a common and shared experience for the part of Russian society that cannot bear the war and Russian crimes in Ukraine.

In his contribution "War and the Field", Zoltán Nagy reflects on the challenges of conducting anthropological fieldwork in Russia during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War. Nagy examines the strong influence of state-controlled media and propaganda on local perceptions during the war, which significantly affected his interactions with representatives of the Indigenous Khanty people and his research dynamics in the region. Under the influence of the Russian media, the local people often saw him as a representative of an enemy nation, which made his research more difficult. The thick description of his own experiences with the projections and reactions of the research participants enables him to make the personal and professional dilemmas he faced

valuable for understanding the mechanisms of propaganda and the local reactions to it. In doing so, he provides a profoundly anthropological analysis that shows how a reflective look back at one's own research material can also be fruitful for understanding the only fragmentarily accessible social reality of the present.

Zbigniew Szmyt's article "Cultural Difference: Orientalisation and Self-Orientalisation of Siberian Ethnic Minorities in the War in Ukraine" traces the current, extremely dynamic situation regarding Indigenous minorities and their participation in the Russian aggression against Ukraine. He appropriately focuses on the Buryats and Tuvans as the minorities that have figured prominently in public discourses. The author attempts to address an important issue, namely, the presence of military personnel from Indigenous ethnic groups in the Russian army during Russia's war against Ukraine. He discusses the orientalisation of ethnic minorities and the mechanism of stereotyping them as exotic Others, but also the adoption of this exoticisation as a self-image. The article analyses the relationship between the state, national ideologies and ethnic minorities in contemporary Russia and Ukraine in the context of war. The processes of self- and other-exoticisation in orientalising forms are understood as mechanisms in the construction of cultural boundaries and political lines of conflict, which today contribute to the formation of national identities. The process of orientalisation and self-orientalisation among Siberian ethnic minorities is interpreted as a significant aspect of the broader national and cultural boundary construction between Russian and Ukrainian societies.

The articles presented in this issue provide a multidimensional view of the participation of national minorities in Russia's war against Ukraine and the impact of the war on the social and political landscape in Russia's ethnic regions and among ethnic minority diasporas abroad. However, the research shows that internal processes of increasing authoritarianism in the Russian state and support for the genocidal war against Ukrainian society are accompanied by silent resistance in Russia and new political projects alternative to Putin's Russia.

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AUTHORS' CONTACTS:

Zbigniew Szmyt
Department of Anthropology and Ethnology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
ORCID: 0000-0001-6658-0317
Email: szmytz@amu.edu.pl

Stephan Dudeck
University of Tartu
ORCID: 0000-0002-3883-1251
Email: stephandudeck@googlemail.com