



Political ethnography and Russian studies in a time of conflict

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ABSTRACT

As reliable and unfiltered access to Russia and Russians becomes a fraught issue for social scientists who wish to conduct surveys, focus groups, do ethnographies, or interview elite actors, the war presents scholars with an opportunity to reflect on questions of what data collection means, and on better communication between quantitative and qualitative scholars. Similarly, it forces us confront the extractive and colonial nature of knowledge production; the war reveals how social science has always relied on, but not really acknowledged, the labor of native scholars, but can no longer ignore indigenously produced work, particularly qualitative research. In this review piece, the author highlights both blind spots in the potential communication between political scientists and other social scientists, and already-existing points of connection that can be further expanded, precisely because of, not despite the war.

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What has Russia's invasion of Ukraine revealed about the state of Russian social science? Could scholars have better predicted – if not the regime's decisions, then society's likely responses? My central argument is that while the war has significant implications for all disciplines and methods, the positive outcome for scholarship would be to use it to reflect on making new connections between researchers and ways of thinking about "entering the field." I will focus only on useful exchanges between anthropology and political science, which have not had much impact on Russian studies. Political ethnography, or an interpretive political science of Russia, is not just "ground-level techniques of data-gathering," but a sensibility that considers "insider meanings and complex contextual-ity" (Schatz 2009, 316).¹

The methodological shock may be the greatest: to the blunt and epistemologically unsatisfactory nature of a key instrument – survey methods. To put it mildly, surveying as a preferred entry-point to data collection – along with secondary analysis of publicly available datasets – has crowded out other approaches, even as more interpretive methods have become more widespread in political studies more generally. As reliable and unfiltered access becomes a fraught issue, whether to survey responders, focus groups, or elite actors, the war presents scholars with an opportunity to reflect on questions of what data collection means, and on better communication between quantitative and qualitative scholars. Similarly, it forces us to confront the extractive and colonial nature of knowledge production; the war reveals how social science has always relied on, but not really acknowledged, the labor of native scholars,² but can no longer ignore indigenously produced work, particularly qualitative research.

Vladmir Gel'man (2023), in this special issue, provides ample evidence for rethinking the hitherto reliance on survey methods among some social scientists. He also points to the relevance of different scholarly optics beyond mainstream political science. One response has been to make list experiments in Russia, e.g. by Frye et al. (2022). These have paved the way for studying sensitive attitudes

with indirect questions across settings. But Alexander Libman (2023), also in this issue, highlights a further problem: the question of suitability of survey experiments on politically sensitive topics and in a society where implementation – even “drawn from reliable panels” will always be suspect.³ His view is that until recently the lack of repression in Russia and the availability of reputable local partners made for a fertile ground for survey and field experiments. The war creates space for more critical voice precisely because it focuses attention on isolated sources of information – such as measurements of public support for the war. In the absence of attention to other sources these polls gain “black box” status (Jackson 2008); they show thinking about Russian society is skewed towards one kind of institutional artefact. Invested domestic actors such as Alexey Levinson defend polling, while Margarita Zavadskaya warns of the weaponization of surveys and points to the feedback effect of presenting Russians as loyal supporters of the regime come-what-may. Greg Yudin, drawing on a longstanding critique of public opinion via Ernesto Laclau, argues that polls – far from being a describing reality – are a “performative activity that uses representations strategically for the restructuring of the social field” (2020, 5). The attention to polls indicating high levels of support leads to Western coverage of “bad and compliant Russians,” which in turn leads to a self-fulfilling prophesy of what I’ve called “defensive consolidation” – in contrast to “rally-round-the-flag” effects (Morris 2022b).⁴

(La Lova 2023), in this special issue, provides ample evidence of some of the frayed wiring under the lid of the black box – the narrow selection of toolkits for collecting and analyzing Russia. Overall, solutions such as to pay more attention to Telegram channels, use more complex instruments to analyze texts, or return to biographical research do not solve the recurring problem: the social construction of “data” via aggregation. This produces the reassuring fiction – essential to scholars in a market of ideas – of social phenomena as the sum of individual inputs (Krippendorff 2005). Further, a major challenge to research relying on survey data in Russia has been non-response effects on samples (Yudin 2020, see also Reisinger, Zaloznaya, and Woo 2023 in this issue). Rosenfeld (2023 in this issue), comments that response rates to Levada have not changed since the war began. She cites Shen and Truex (2021), who examine non-response rates to sensitive questions transnationally and observe that authoritarian systems do not necessarily differ in response rate from democratic states. However, using the Levada data Rosenfeld refers to – the only publicly available data we have in Russia – response rates are only around 20–30%. Indeed, a recent report by Levada on survey methods during the war is itself a reactive publication, produced precisely because of widespread dissatisfaction with transparency in Russian polling, and the close relationship of most pollsters, even Levada, to the authorities. The point is that the war allows us to spotlight what have always been issues of representativeness and validity – the stubbornly low response rate: between 20% and 30% (a falling trend since the war began); that a significant majority refuse to participate (60%) in polls; that younger women are much more likely to refuse participation; and that nearly half of contacts would not even answer a poll about trust in the president prior to the war (Agapeeva and Volkov 2022). One could go on and examine the closed ecosystem of polling and academic survey administration and how it perpetuates a lack of transparency. Pollsters in Russia admit to tailoring results to client expectations (including, in academic contexts “data cleaning,” inconsistencies in panel composition). These issues are compounded by the dangers of organizational incest: all the big survey outfits contract out their work to a small set of field researchers whose field practices are open to criticism. Sub-subcontracting in data gathering for academic research whereby a commissioning academic takes on trust the collection and processing of raw data via an intermediary who in turn contracts out the work is a situation open to abuse and fakery for material gain.⁵

Mikhail Dmitriev and Anastasia Nikolskaya have written on the need to turn to focus groups in times of flux when ideas are not congealed.⁶ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (2022) proposes an alternative to survey data reliance in her use of focus group methods to investigate public opinion in post-Crimea Russia, arguing that group-based factors of opinion formation are better grasped this way. Can we at least moderate the tendency to “pollocracy”? My own political ethnography is small “n” but transparent and longitudinal, based on over a decade of work embedded in a community

supposedly loyal to the regime – the Russian rustbelt (Morris 2016). I welcome a dialogue with my political science colleagues, such as that evidenced in the forthcoming volume co-edited with Regina Smyth (see also Smyth 2023 in this issue) and Andrei Semenov. There, the accent is on triangulation via multiple ways of entering the field and to data gathering, from long-term observation by researchers, in-depth semi-structured interviews with key decision-makers, author-constructed protest datasets, social media analysis, focus groups, to large-scale online surveys (Morris, Semenov, and Smyth 2023).

However, my perspective here is not to rehearse critiques of survey methods – I have done that elsewhere (see Morris 2022a for a fuller discussion) – but rather remark that survey method, focus groups, and even interviews always benefit from triangulation with interpretive and immersive approaches. Triangulation is not just methodological cross-checking, but involves an active challenge to the “naiveté” of aggregative approaches to data processing (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 183–184). Before the war, some of the best scholarship did this. However, it was a tiny fraction of what was published in the social science outlets available to Russian scholars in the anglophone world. Taking the last two years of *Problems of Post-Communism* and *Post-Soviet Affairs* together we get a clear picture.⁷ Since the beginning of 2021, these two journals published over 100 articles of original research.⁸ Most articles are not based on the collection of primary data sets or materials, but instead comprise studies based on approaches such as textual and discourse analysis and interpretation of existing data sets, such as from Rosstat. Of the original data collection methods favored, surveying is the most popular at approximately 20% of papers – although some of these papers did not administer new surveys but interpreted existing ones. Around 10% of papers used interview or focus group data collected by or on behalf of their authors.

Employing a strict definition of “mixed” or “multi” methods to describe where a researcher has created new datasets based on quantitative and qualitative collections, only four papers (less than 4% of papers) unambiguously qualified. An example of successful multi-method research is Klyachkina (2021), who used original interviews, observation, and household surveys over nine months of fieldwork in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia to investigate the organization and logic of governance. Without triangulation, the author would not have been able to not only uncover the role of non-state authorities but differentiate where coercion or competition are major factors, and identify the shape of comparative regional political differences. The other explicitly ethnographic papers published by these journals include Maurizio Totaro (2021) on counter-extremism in Kazakhstan, who makes use of auto-ethnography and an insider “guide” to the field. Diana Kudaibergenova (2021) uses mixed methodology of participant observation, interviews, and focus groups in “everyday encounters and interactions in the powerful structures of officials’ offices and government buildings” across Central Asia. Caress Schenk (2021) draws on ethnographic work with migrants and gatekeepers in Russia’s migration sphere to show how “coercive interactions between migrants and state agents produce visible data and media images that are projected to the public as immigration control.”

Is the skewed distribution of methods a problem? Perhaps not in itself. After all, even before the war, the disciplinary division along with resource and time restraints limited the toolbox of all but the luckiest of researchers. Sociologists and anthropologists have no shortage of publishing venues beyond these area journals. Some cutting-edge research on politically relevant Russian themes is published in leading disciplinary journals. Once more, a manual search of leading anthropology and sociology journals in the last few years is revealing: Anna Kruglova writes on the state as a total social fact in Russia and critiques pluralist accounts (2019); Sarah Ashwin, Katherine Keenan, and Irina Kozina use mixed methods to investigate some implications of working pensioners and subjective well-being in Russia (2021); Anna Zhelnina shows how responses to the Moscow housing renovation program contribute to theories of strategic action and social movements (2022). What is noteworthy about this research? It unpacks practice by micro-level political actors, focusing not only on reported rationalities but also the reflexivity of participants and their practical reasoning as observed – in practice. It thereby has the potential to identify nascent political transformations. This strand in

socio-political research responds to insights from sociological pragmatism's critique of methodological individualism, and the "practice," and actor-network turns in contemporary thought. As such, its focus on situational rationality has the potential to bridge micro and macro approaches by bringing in what actually happens in institutions, bureaucracies, and interacting groups.⁹ Situational rationalities are best apprehended by situated researchers – this does not imply any loss of objectivity or "going native."

However, given the volume of material in leading generalist social science journals, Russia-focused research like that by the authors above is a rarity. "High-ranking" (top 10 within impact-factor ranking) sociology and anthropology journals have had little interest in publishing research on Russia and the former Soviet Union. In addition, in every case cited here, the lead authors are scholars trained in the UK or USA. More importantly, it is likely their work in the journals *Sociology* and *American Ethnologist* is of little interest to most political scientists, including those publishing in *Problems of Post-Communism* and *Post-Soviet Affairs*, let alone mainstream political science journals. A journal such as *Laboratorium: The Russian Review of Social Research* – publishing social science research in both Russian and English – might be successful and attract talented researchers from within Russia and abroad, but is even less likely to be read or cited, despite offering plenty of qualitative research of relevance to anglophone political science.¹⁰ The perennial problem is the disciplinary silo-ing of Russian studies, but which has accelerated in recent years, with political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists conducting separate conversations. Just to take one of our examples: Sarah Ashwin is a household name since the 1990s to scholars studying gender or labor in Russia. Yet her work gets less than a dozen mentions in *Post-Soviet Affairs* and *Problems of Post-Communism* for their entire searchable run of publications. What chance for the less established scholars Zhelnina and Kruglova, whose work is ethnographic? And yet their qualitative treatment of topics is highly relevant to political scientists.

"Qualitative" can mean different things to different people. I am using it in the sense of "interpretive" to distinguish surveys, focus groups, and even interview modes of research informed by realist-objectivist suppositions from approaches anchored in an ethnomethodological, or allied tradition (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2007). These are not just more centered on immersive and embedded fieldwork contexts, but, as the name suggests, the "interpretive turn" in political science was about reforging links between anthropology and the study of politics and endowing such research with epistemological reflexivity. However, a substantivist and more ethnographic approach touted by scholars such as Yanow and Schwartz-Shea was not intended to "forswear generalizations or causal explanations" (Wedeen 2010, 255). Indeed, indeed, political ethnography approaches, such as those proposed by Schatz and Kubik were positivist – making the case that the "softest" qualitative approaches can support causal inferences.

It is also worth emphasizing that research may be interpretive by sensibility, even if it foregoes participant observational or ethnographic research design. There are plenty of recent social media and even biographical or text-based studies that foreground the hermeneutic situatedness of researcher and researched. In survey approaches too, open-ended questions can be coded for the genre of response (sarcasm, reverence) – for example, in Krawatzek's research on how Russian youth understand the past (2021). And Cai Wilkinson's (2014) research on Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution draws directly on the interpretive turn in political science, molding ethnography to the limitations of fieldwork in a difficult environment while remaining faithful to reflexive engagement. More recently, some of the original proponents of the interpretive turn have renewed their call for more "intentional immersion" by political scientists in the life-worlds of those studied (Schwartz-Shea and Majic 2017). This was happening before the war but only in very small doses among those studying Russia; it was much more widespread among indigenous scholars who considered themselves sociologists. However, many native Russian scholars' socialization as researchers (such as the organizers of *Laboratorium*) was linked to the traditions of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies associated with Stuart Hall. If interpretive political science remains conspicuous by its absence, what would it look like and what other existing cues to interdisciplinary communication can we draw on to support

a more pluralist environment, and how can scholars execute such research after the Russian invasion of Ukraine? 195

The point of immersive “life-worlds” or “culturalist” approaches and methods is not to downplay or avoid theorization or generalization between cases, but instead anchor them to social reality. Can phenomena such as decisions to start aggressive wars and broad societal acquiescence to such decisions be explained by theories that are universally applicable? Are the mechanisms of consent and accommodation of a society to a ruling group possible to uncover using universal models of human behavior such as rational choice? These are the epistemological and ontological dimensions of studying Russia now that divide many political scientists from anthropologists. A version of this divide was described by Aronoff, Myron and Kubik (2013) in their call for a “convergent approach” between the two disciplines. Using the example of *Homo Sovieticus*, they demonstrated the value of ethnography to verify, or in their case reject, assumptions that sometimes guide entire research projects in political studies. 200 205

In justifying political ethnography, they drew attention to the need to balance materialist-institutional perspectives with symbolic-cultural approaches – something that looks highly relevant to the current conjuncture. If politics is partly locally produced, requiring attention to concrete details of interaction, then political scientists, particularly positivist-oriented ones, should become “hungry” for more ethnography (Aronoff, Myron and Kubik 2013, 25) to triangulate their data. Process tracing – itself a positivist methodology – via long-term observation and immersion need not exclude the search for correlation; interpretation need not deny social modeling that accepts the existence of objective social facts. Ethnography is well suited as a bedfellow to game theory approaches, and the study of power and questions of structure and agency, but this requires political scientists to recalibrate some of their assumptions about the interplay between formal social structures and informal social organization (Aronoff, Myron and Kubik 2013, 33). 210 215

Before the onset of war, one of the few scholars working on political topics to take seriously Aronoff and Kubik’s call was Samuel Greene. Greene combined a broad review of political and sociological theory on post-communist legacies with attention to the observationally “thick” methods of anthropology (2019). Taking an interpretive approach means uncovering the “vernacular knowledge” that Russians possess about their state and regime. This helps test conventional wisdom – whether about the effect of media on public opinion, or the purported low level of generalized social trust (Greene 2019). While Greene draws attention to the local scale as generative of agency and identity, plenty of sociologists and anthropologists are conducting participant observation and ethnography on social action and contention in Russia. I have already mentioned Anna Zhelnina’s work on renovation and activism. Her work intersects with other social researchers who employ ethnographic methods to uncover the micro-political and its broader resonance influenced by continental currents in social thought (Clément and Zhelnina 2020; Thévenot 2020; Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2020). Reviewing the two politics journals devoted to the FSU area discussed earlier, there are other scholars who stand out: Caress Schenk’s recent work on state capacity and immigration control (2021), only possible thanks to ethnographic triangulation in collaboration with local researchers. Laryš and Souleimanov (2022) use an embedded mode of fieldwork to examine the “delegated rebellion” in Donbas. We should also note other ethnographic studies with political topics published in the best-known anglophone area studies journals recently (Hervouet 2021; Morris and Garibyan 2021; Ringel 2021; Yusupova 2022). 220 225 230 235

We see among these names numerous younger scholars from the former USSR. Not all have positions in, or PhDs from, Western institutions. The war may accelerate processes whereby the embedded work of qualified local scholars may shine when access for Western researchers is restricted – an issue that was true during the COVID pandemic also. So far, predictions of the death of field research in Russia on political and social themes, even sensitive ones, have proven premature. The war and ratcheting restrictions in Russia are not necessarily the biggest barriers to field research of any kind in Russia. As Schwartz-Shea and Majic (2017) make clear, the biggest obstacles to ethnographic modes of data gathering are found in the institutional and disciplinary 240 245

publishing practices of the anglophone academy. Schatz argues that access problems for political ethnographers should never dictate the terms of research engagement; “proximity” and “intimacy” are ideals, and the “nearest possible vantage point” might suffice (Schatz 2009, 307). Even without direct access, an ethnographic approach can be cultivated through a sensitivity to everyday texts and meaning-making. This might sound blasé, but this point emerges directly from my own problems with access to the field. My forthcoming monograph depends on continuing access to political and labor activists in Russia. Where face-to-face interviews are no longer possible, and some forms of communication risky for the activists, I have turned to new forms of material – such as diaries reflecting on their previous activities and feelings and participatory techniques such as drawing (illustrating on paper) activists’ feelings about Russian society, a method used with success by Alexandrina Vanke (2021). 250 255

Might better acknowledgement and incorporation of local researchers be part of the answer, taking into account risks and ethical issues? It has long been the case that local field researchers, many with years of experience and high-quality publications in their native languages, do not get the “billing” in anglophone research commensurate with their contributions. This is the open secret, in area studies (and its “mother” disciplines), of the extractive and colonial nature of knowledge production; many projects’ dependency on local research fixers, data collators, and collectors is well known but not acknowledged. Asel Doolotkeldieva, whose political ethnography provides key insights into protests in Bishkek in 2020 (2021), comments on how “collaboration” almost always falls short of co-authorship: 260 265

... every semester I get dozens of demands to “participate” in research projects. In reality what Western scholars need is my “local” knowledge. Why not openly ask for help/expert interview instead of masking it with “participation,” because the latter means a different thing.¹¹

Just as we need to face up to native scholars regarding unequal relations of knowledge production, the war should prompt us to reflect on how to respond to challenges to ethnographic collaboration with native scholars and interlocutors. The obvious response is for Western researchers to give more trust, more space, and more resources to already-existing immersive scholarship being conducted in Russia. Important political topics studied in the main “remotely,” are still possible candidates for ethnographic triangulation, despite the effect of the war: trash and environmental activism, microcredit and household finances as sources of politicization, local and regional government and organizational studies. Konstantin Gaaze recently wrote: “For anthropology of the state, Russia can still be studied holistically despite obstacles. Mediating epistemology [may be] needed” and new communities for observation can be generated in unlikely places (2019). Gaaze’s research shows how political ethnographies do not have to be fully peopled in the sense of containing interview transcripts or recorded observations to qualify as such. A sociological and anthropological imagination worth its name draws on the founding principles of embeddedness of observer and observation, but is not just “ground-level techniques of data-gathering,” but a sensibility that considers “insider meanings and complex contextuality” (Schatz 2009, 316). War and autocracy, along with the disturbing calls to “cancel” Russia, only intensify the need for the ethnographic study of her politics to avoid the simplistic condensation of polling artefacts we see translated into dangerous public discourse in the West about what Russians think about the war, Putin, and Russia’s place in the world. 270 275 280 285

Notes

1. There is also a realist tradition in political science which makes use of ethnographic methods, but this is beyond the scope of the current article (see Kubik 2009; Prinz 2020). 290
2. “Native” scholars may also not necessarily be based in their country of origin, but of course the vast majority are. The war also draws attention to the way “native scholars” in elite Western institutions bear an increasing burden of “authenticity,” just like during the period of the Cold War emigres were disproportionately relied on. The warning from history here should be obvious.

3. As an ethnographer used to being asked by reviewers to justify my sources in some detail, I am struck by how often the details of survey implementation and the reliance on politically-exposed Russia-based gatekeepers is given a free pass without much mention in publications. The quote is from Krawatzek (2021). 295
4. Levinson's post: <https://ridl.io/why-continue-polling-in-russia/>. Zavadskaya's post: <https://ridl.io/on-the-harmfulness-of-russian-polls/>
5. For more information on the lack of transparency of polling practices, both academic and commercial, see this detailed discussion where pollsters anonymously admit to shady practices such as very poor field practices and faking results: <https://postsocialism.org/2022/03/21/dont-trust-opinion-polling-about-support-in-russia-for-the-war-on-ukraine/> 300
6. <https://therussianreader.com/tag/mikhail-dmitriev/>
7. This is based on a manual count by the author who skimmed every article in these two journals published since the first issue of 2021. The count could have extended to *Europe-Asia Studies*, but I don't think the result would have been different. La Lova (2023) in this special issue has undertaken a more sophisticated analysis of publishing on Russia beyond area studies journals. 305
8. 2022 publications are incomplete as of this writing. In a typical year, these journals publish between 30 and 45 articles each. The total for these two years is likely to exceed 150, but due to the typical delay to publication I have focused on the first 100 publications in 2021–22. 310
9. For a review of European pragmatism, see Barthe et al. (2013).
10. I am aware that this article mainly cites anglophone research. *Laboratorium*, together with *Sociology of Power* and some other Russian journals, are increasingly important fora for cutting-edge social science in Russia and in Russian. Once again, the war's influence of the politics of knowledge production in Russia, and on academic incentives, is likely to intensify the trend of Russian scholars choosing to publish in these outlets rather than in anglophone journals. For a selection of the latest work in *Laboratorium*, see: <https://www.soclabo.org/index.php/laboratorium#:~:text=Laboratorium%3A%20Russian%20Review%20of%20Social%20Research%20is%20an%20open%2Daccess,research%20in%20Russian%20and%20English> 315
11. Twitter post, 6 July 2022. <https://twitter.com/ADoolotkeldieva/status/1544674380688629762> 320

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