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Anthropologists at war?

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Besides extensive human suffering and immense material destruction, Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February revealed differences among anthropologists on how to grasp the logic and the causes of this war.¹ It has uncovered some issues related to interpretation (as well as the limits of relativism) and raised questions concerning anthropologists' ideas about their (and their professional associations') place in the contemporary world.

Anthropologists' stances on war have a long history. In 1919, Sir Charles Read, the President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, started his Presidential address: 'Of all the many kinds of social catastrophe due to human action, none is more subversive and disturbing than war' (1919: 12). Another former President of the RAI, W.H.R. Rivers, treating soldiers suffering from what was later known as post-traumatic stress syndrome, claimed that the instinct for self-preservation is key to understanding human behaviour, a guide to the unconscious. This understanding led him to establish a new technique for treating these patients (Rivers 1919).

Another ancestor, Bronislaw Malinowski, writing over eight decades ago, proposed that 'the task of evaluating war in terms of cultural analysis is today the main duty of the theory of civilization' (1941: 522). Situations become especially problematic when we try to relate to the war in our own country (Greverus 1995) or when confronted with the violence waged by our own government (Günay 2013).

The Russian invasion opens intriguing problems of interpretation. During the former Yugoslavian wars (1991-1999), some commentators idealized Serbian President Slobodan Milošević as the person who 'had the courage' to 'stand up to the West'. 'The West' here stands for Western European countries and the US, later also NATO. His followers perceived Milošević as 'a good guy', fighting a superior enemy against the odds. Many, taking him as a fighter against capitalism and American imperialism, ignored his forces' atrocities. The UK-based magazine *Living Marxism* claimed that the war crimes in Bosnia never happened, leading to the libel case that concluded with the magazine's termination (Palmer 2019). I have discussed the conflicting imagery of these wars and the disagreements they produced among anthropologists (Bošković 2010).

Today, some similarly depict the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Vladimirovič Putin, as someone 'standing up' to American imperialism or just responding to the provocations from Western countries. Ukraine does not mean much in this dichotomy.

Smoleński and Dutkiewicz (2022) characterize this as 'Westplaining' and say:

The University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer, for instance, recently claimed in *The New Yorker* that NATO's expansion was perceived as a security threat, eliciting a lethal response. To Mearsheimer's credit, he admits that great powers are predators, ensuring that their smaller neighbors are not free to pursue policies of their own choice. But on this reading, it is NATO's fault, driven primarily by America's interest in expanding its sphere of influence, that Russia has lashed out, seeking to protect its own sphere of influence.

They note that Putin had formulated Ukraine within Russia's sphere of influence as early as 2007.

The implications of Mearsheimer's position are clear: there are countries (big powers) whose citizens can decide what kind of policies they will pursue, and there are coun-

tries that cannot. 'In other words, Eastern European countries should recognize their status as second-class citizens in the community of states and accept their geopolitical role as neutral buffers at the edges of the vestiges of the American and Russian empires' (Smoleński & Dutkiewicz 2022).

The authors also note how this explanation immediately seduced proponents from all sides of the political spectrum, from economists like Jeffrey Sachs to one of the leaders of the new European left, Yannis Varoufakis, and in institutions from the libertarian Cato Institute to the *Guardian* newspaper.

On 25 February, the day after the Russians invaded Ukraine, more than 400 (currently 1,019) independent Russian ethnologists and anthropologists endangered their jobs and lives by composing and then signing a petition condemning the war and demanding an immediate end to the hostilities.²

The European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) championed their cause³ and issued its own statement on 26 February,⁴ which we will look at below. The International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) condemned the invasion outright as 'the outrageous and unprovoked Russian military invasion of Ukraine' also on 26 February.⁵ The World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) issued a statement on 3 March.⁶ The American Anthropological Association (AAA) did

not follow up until 10 March, though the AAA Society for the Anthropology of Europe issued a statement as early as 26 February.⁷

On 3 March, the Executive Committee of the Association of Russian Ethnologists and Anthropologists (AAER) controversially condemned the independent Russian petition and took the Russian government line without consulting their membership.⁸ They claimed that Russia ‘protects the population of Donbas’ and the association stands ‘against the revival of Nazism and all kinds of discrimination and violence, including informational and economic’.

EASA took a detailed interest in this matter and condemned the Putin-supporting AAER position in no uncertain terms on the same day. However, though the WCAA distanced itself from the AAER on 7 March, it did not do what it could have done, namely, to expel this association from its membership, as some have requested they do.⁹

Most associations condemned Putin for the war outright. However, the EASA initial statement is more complicated. On 26 February, the EASA Executive Committee condemned Putin’s invasion, adding a touch of relativism: ‘We see him as the main aggressor in the current situation that – as many anthropologists working in the post-socialist world have shown through their work – has its roots in both the Russian imperial ambitions and the NATO expansion into the Eastern European territory.’

This drew an immediate response from a group of Poland-based anthropologists who formulated a petition to change this to an unambiguous condemnation, as had the other associations:

While we fully agree that the war against Ukraine has roots in Russian imperial ambitions, we reject the suggestion that

Russia’s armed aggression is caused by NATO expansion into the Eastern European territory. Such a statement would imply that sovereign countries of Eastern Europe do not have the right to join international alliances unless Russia approves, justifying Russia’s colonialist and imperialist claims over countries in Eastern Europe. As anthropologists, we understand Ukraine’s defensive actions as resistance against the reactionary empire and recognize the right of people of sovereign states to decide on membership in international alliances. The sentence also contains a deeply troubling ambiguity – referring to Putin as ‘main aggressor’ implies that there are more aggressors in this war than Putin and Russia, assigning the blame for the war against Ukraine (even asymmetrically) to another party.¹⁰

One hundred and seventy-three anthropologists, including myself, signed the petition. The petition organizers approached the EASA Executive Committee, saying they would go public should EASA not revise its statement. However, since the statement was changed on 15 March, eliminating reference to ‘NATO expansion’ and Putin as the ‘main’ aggressor, the petition with its signatories was not sent to EASA or made public at the time.¹¹

The petition was circulated initially among anthropologists living and working in Poland but soon more widely. Poland is, of course, the leading destination of the millions of refugees from Ukraine. Cracow, the city where I was teaching at the time with a population of 800,000, became a temporary home for more than 300,000 refugees over only a couple of weeks. Many Poles – including some anthropologists I know – opened their homes to the refugees. Therefore, the war in Ukraine was (and is) very much an issue in Poland, and any statements EASA makes would naturally be subject to severe scrutiny.

On 14 April on *FocaalBlog*, Martin Fotta (2022) criticized the petition organizers’ attempt to change the EASA statement, exaggeratedly characterizing it as a sign of ‘weaponization of scholarship’, ‘growing censorship’, ‘militarism’, ‘securitization’ and ‘warmongering’. He accused the petition organizers of ‘moralizing’ and argued: ‘Rather than an argument about popular sovereignty, the initiators’ position is a pro-NATO one. It presents a false dichotomy: if one is against Putin, one cannot be against NATO.’

By framing the petition in terms of its initiators’ national residence rather than the diversity of its signatories, Fotta forged the impression that the petition adopted a CEE (Central and Eastern European) stance:

The petition was initiated by eight anthropologists – seven Polish and one Slovak. The petition now claims to speak for an ‘international anthropological community’, whereas the EASA website speaks of an initiative by ‘EASA members’ that stimulated the change. Since the petition with signatures was never publicized, I must suppose that the executive committee decided to change the wording of the statement following the email from the protest initiators. A predominantly CEE character of the initiative is further reflected in the online social life of the petition: most of the signatures come from Poland, Slovakia and Czechia. And while a public campaign was stopped short by the EASA EC [Executive Committee] changing its statement, any momentum for obtaining a critical mass for the protest would have emerged from within this region.

In response, first, this was not a petition mainly based on a CEE stance. Anthropologists from at least 27 countries signed it – including Peru and Portugal. Once it achieved its purpose, circulation ceased. Had it been circulated more openly, widely and for longer, there would have been more signatories from different countries.

Second, the petitioners’ request for the removal of ‘the expansion of NATO’ from the EC statement was born not from blind support for NATO, as Fotta infers, but from the need for our representative European association to make a clear and uncontroversial statement as to who the

aggressor, in this case, is, as had the other anthropology associations.

Why is Fotta so defensive of EASA’s initial statement? He warns that ‘many members’ would want that the association ‘abstains from activism and politics’ and that its turnaround, among other things, signifies ‘an unwelcome ideological move to the left’. However, from his arguments, Fotta himself is not shy to assert his own ‘ideology’, ‘politics’ or even ‘activism’.

On 21 April, as part of a discussion on the Ukraine war,¹² Don Kalb (2022), founding editor of *Focaal* and *FocaalBlog*, wrote, ‘There are loud and self-advertised NATO anthropologists around these days who imagine that NATO can save us from the abyss and must have been the solution all along.’ Kalb claims that ‘much of the Global South and all the BRICS have refused to support the Western condemnation and isolation of Russia’. However, he might, in the same breath, mention that these countries also overwhelmingly voted to support the resolution condemning Russian aggression at the 11th UN Emergency Special Session on

24 March, with only five votes opposing the resolution.¹³

Kalb claims that *FocaalBlog* is not in the business of 'moral justification' and that 'none of our authors engages in it'. Yet Fotta appears sour over EASA changing its statement blaming CEE anthropologists for bending EASA to their collective will.

Or is this a case of the pot calling the kettle black? *FocaalBlog*'s impressive but select list of 72 editors, consulting editors and editorial board members suggests *FocaalBlog* works in a blind spot that overlooks perspectives from countries closest to the borders with Russia. The single token Eastern European consulting editor from the Czech Republic cannot make up for their ignorance in depicting EASA petitioners as 'NATO anthropologists' (the more so since this person signed the EASA petition).

Criticize NATO, if you like. NATO is no innocent party towards. We do not want war; we are anti-war. The real question is this: why was EASA the only association to have sent such a prevaricating message?

Conflict looks different from where you stand. While a man is in the process of viciously beating his wife and children, do you procrastinate on how other parties in his troubled life might have precipitated this violence, only to scupper effective intervention?

Professional associations need to respond to acts of war with widely supported clear messages and not philosophical tracts its members might disagree with. EASA did well to address this issue before other professional associations. However, Russia is a formidable aggressor, and EASA does not serve Russia's close neighbours well when condemning and yet also appearing to excuse its unbridled acts of aggression.

If Kalb and Fotta think the EASA petitioners are 'NATO anthropologists', then what are they? Putin's useful idiots? 'Enlightened' anthropologists with no skin in the game can afford to prevaricate, speculate and philosophize all they like from a safe distance. Still, they should accept that their ideological moralizing is not shared by everyone and may even come across as repugnant to those who live closest to the fire. If their questions are philosophical, ours are now existential. If they listened to us occasionally, as a relenting EASA finally and correctly did, they would give anthropologists less reason to wage war on each other. Sour grapes?

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2. <https://www.change.org/p/russian-president-and-russian-government-stop-the-war-in-ukraine>.

3. A full description of the independent Russian petition is available at <https://www.easaonline.org/news/russiapetn.shtml>.

4. <https://www.easaonline.org/publications/support/ukraine0222>.

5. <https://www.siefhome.org/publications/statements/ukraine0222>.

6. <https://www.apantropologia.org/apa/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WCAA-Statement-on-Ukraine.pdf>.

7. <https://sae.americananthro.org/2022/03/joint-sae-soyuz-statement-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>. <https://www.americananthro.org/ukraine>. The statement clarifies that the AAA supports the SAE/ Soyuz statement available at: <https://sae.americananthro.org/2022/03/joint-sae-soyuz-statement-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

8. The Executive Committee statement in Russian is available on <https://aaer.co/>. It is available in English and French at: <https://www.easaonline.org/news/russiapetn.shtml>.

9. <https://www.waunet.org/wcaa/wp-content/uploads/newsletters/WCAA-response-to-AAER-Statement-for-release.pdf>.

10. A Protest against Controversial Ideas in the 'EASA Statement on the Russian War against Ukraine', 17 March 2022. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UHjtoczfb0EF55eqQRkVpaCJSyBq3cz3F5MeufV3u2s>.

11. The revised statement is available at: <https://www.easaonline.org/publications/support/ukraine0222>.

12. This thread was initiated by a post from David Harvey (2022),

13. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114632>

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