

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS: ON A NON-WAR*

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The 23rd of February is Defender of the Fatherland Day in Russia (between 1949 and 2002 it was the Soviet Army and Navy Day), or as people commonly refer to it, ‘Men’s Day’. In the early hours of February 24th, my Komi friends, old soldiers from the Soviet Army days, dropped off to sleep for a whole day. They woke up by the late evening, switched on a TV set and learned that Russia had already finished with Ukraine. According to the news, it was basically all over. My friends sent me a message: “We overslept the whole war!”

That happened on the first day of Russian attack on Ukraine. We call the conflict, which has, as I write these lines, lasted for three months, a war without much confusion. But according to Russia’s official viewpoint, which is shared by many, there is a non-war going on. How have we ended up in a situation where a major military conflict, that affects many millions of lives, does not count as a war?

But we can approach the problem from the opposite starting point, as well. How can we determine that there is a war? And how can we decide when it is over? These are simple questions, although apparently it is quite possible to propose an influential public discourse that massively confuses the perception of events. In this way we have entered the realm of non-events and simulation.

Francis Bacon (1997: 18) has already claimed that simulation is inevitable in politics, as “nakedness is uncomely, as well in mind, as body; and is addeth no small reverence, to men’s manners, and actions”. Bacon considered simulation a sufficient political tool, as it lays to sleep one’s enemies and enables one to “to discover the mind of another” (ibid.: 19). To be fair, we need to admit that Bacon also valued sincerity and truth as means of political action, giving to those equal usefulness with dissimulation (lying about not having something) and simulation (pretending to have something).

Bacon does not write about simulation as an overall social disposition despite the fact that in recent times it seems to penetrate all societies. Jean Baudrillard (1994: 1) claims that simulation “is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal”. Baudrillard considers simulation overwhelming, covering all the real

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with replication. In this process of common imitation, independent distinction between various feelings, facts and experiences is dissolved. There is no longer the “magic of the concept and the charm of the real” that characterised difference in the times before simulation became unreserved. Interested parties create simulacrum from elements of shared memory, predetermined schemes, and means of control. In this process, distinction between genuine and fictional is lost. (Ibid.: 1–3)

If imitation of the real penetrates more areas of social life, people become more inclined to accept government simulacrum. Whatever is said by the establishment no longer seems odd. But simulation and dissimulation are much easier if the topic concerns something geographically and culturally far from us, for example, indigenous affairs.

A classic of American cultural anthropology, Marshall Sahlins (1985: vii) starts his *Islands of History* with the following words: “History is culturally ordered, differently so in different societies, according to meaningful schemes of things”. In different societies, the style of establishing and expressing historicity varies. If some event does not fit into a scheme, culture may alter structurally to re-evaluate itself. (Ibid.: vii–x)

Indigenous peoples’ perception of their history is not usually reflected in official documents or in history books. Another American anthropologist, Raymond Fogelson (1989: 134), argues that indigenous sensitivity towards the old times may seem strange from “literately conditioned perspectives”. Understanding of historical event is attached to “values, meanings, symbolism, worldviews, social structural principles, and other variables”. If painful events are neglected, they become non-existent (ibid.: 141–143; see also Kan 2019: 171).

From the indigenous perspective, both historical and mythic events are real. Sahlins (1985: xv) claims that cosmology induces movement in cultural categories and actions. Some events, recognised in the European perception may appear non-events to indigenous sensitivity (ibid.: viii). At the same time, if in a colonial encounter a power imbalance is drastic, the winner may not even notice that something happened. In addition to which, fabricated events may also have very serious consequences, leading to a prominent theoretical agreement about the distinct potential of the indigenous feeling of history. As Sahlins (ibid.) puts it: “Nor do I now think that historians are entitled to ignore these exotic histories just because they are culturally remote and as recorded do not go very far back.”

Uncertain connection between indigenous and colonial historicity also appears in my own ethnographic explorations. For a few decades, I have studied early Soviet period resistance movements of the Finno-Ugric indigenous peoples of the north. It was always striking to realise how differently distinctive social agents can interpret this process. Were these events wars or just some seditions? If taking official evidence seriously, one may also ask: did anything happen at all?

In north-western Siberia, during the 1930–1940s, indigenous groups organised several uprisings against the Soviet regime on the Kazym River, and Yamal and Taimyr Peninsulas, and Polar Urals’ tundra. Hundreds of people participated in these resistance endeavours (sometimes called ‘wars’, or ‘war gatherings’) and even bigger number of indigenes were punished afterwards. Oral history narratives reveal that the Soviet security police and Red Army troops shot many people dead, but also raped many others, drowned them in ice holes, killed them with clubs made of larch, bombed them, and

left them to freeze or to starve to death without food supplies, fishing or hunting equipment. Official documents reflect nothing of this. If we investigate the archives, these punishment troops killed nobody. If we follow the official story, these Red Army soldiers and security police officers were extremely humane and only indigenous “kulaks and shamans” acted with extreme cruelty.

Archival sources also reflect other kinds of indigenous uprising that did not happen in real life. These imaginary revolts were projected by Soviet officials over various indigenous regions on the Northern Sosva, Lyapin, Voykar and Synya rivers, with hundreds of ‘participants’ executed (Perevalova 2016: 133–136). The number of victims resulting from these imaginary revolts exceeded the casualties of the real uprisings.

Some of these uprisings never happened from the official Soviet point of view, the others didn’t happen from the indigenous perspective. In a different sense, all these revolts were non-events. Connection between social reality and discourse remained ambiguous. Even today the Khanty and Nenets remember their wars from a century ago. But only very few can connect the disappearance of hundreds of indigenous men with fabricated revolts that were created simultaneously.

Many (or most, maybe even all) public stories about the war in Ukraine seem hyper-real (in Baudrillard’s sense). This routine of producing non-events was practiced on indigenes, or just smaller antagonists, over a long period. There is always a hope for some that a more implausible story may slip through more easily. It is similar regarding the early Soviet period Khanty and Samoyed wars – for the indigenous communities it was a serious, even existential, fight, but according to the officials there was basically nothing going on.

Everything was so much different in 2014, when Russia invaded Ukraine last time. In Russia, people did not come onto the streets en masse to support the government’s action, scholars did not sign petitions to encourage the ‘denazification’ of Ukraine, no ethnographic flash mobs were arranged with folk dances and songs and there were no shamanic rituals to express solidarity with a non-war that must be won. Everything was much more hidden back then. But now the emphasis on something that, supposedly, is not going on, is very much visible.

Being in a Komi village in the November of the previous campaign in 2014, I also experienced full support for the Russian Army among the old ladies who are, in principle, long-term favourites of ethnographers. Back then the topic of Ukraine made interaction with zombified grannies tense, although only during prime time when news was broadcast on television. Before and after the obligatory TV sessions, our connection was still idyllic.

I wrote about that last war experience in another editorial (Leete 2019). I must admit that the earlier story appears rather soft today. It is much tougher this time. But now I have no need or chance to negotiate a political relationship with ladies in a Komi village, as the Estonian scholars have been kept at bay by visa restrictions for a few years already (before the war, an official explanation for this was the COVID-19 pandemic).

The Ukrainians appear in the current simulacrum of non-war as the Khanty and Nenets almost a hundred years ago during their wars against the Soviets. Back then, one could do with indigenous groups whatever was required and to claim that nothing ever happened. In principle, it looks rather similar now in Ukraine.

Those of us who work with indigenous partners in the Russian North and Siberia have been cut off from the tangible ethnographic field. But despite the war, a virtual reality helps me keep in contact with my Komi associates. Although my friends did not take seriously the initial news of victory in a non-war, it soon turned out to be a rather severe concern. “Now I am desperate all the time”, my friend wrote two months later.

Ironically, now we look at the concept of ‘non-war’ as something evil. But this paradox has its logic. If something is neglected too enthusiastically, one starts to wonder.

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P.S. We prepared this issue in a rather different mood. All the papers published here were prepared before the ‘non-war’ period. Our journal is a scholarly forum covering a wide range of topics, as indicated by the content of the current issue, as well. War and conflict are not in our prominent focus, so this Editorial appears somehow off target.

We had a special plan with this year’s volume of the *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*. As our dear colleague and long-term member of our Editorial staff Professor of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu Ülo Valk turns 60 soon, we decided to celebrate his birthday with a special gift from the journal. We agreed with some of our colleagues that they would write special articles, touching upon important critical topics in ethnology and folkloristics. As a result of this agreement, we publish an article by Professor of Folklore and Anthropology Jason Baird Jackson from the Indiana University, Bloomington in this issue’s “Inspirational Insights” section. Professor Jackson discusses the domain of world-systems analysis, saying that the paper was inspired by his visit to Tartu a few years ago and discussions with Professor Valk. We hope that this will be a suitable present for a genuine scholar – to receive an intellectual challenge.

Happy Birthday, Ülo!