

Autoethnographic Reflections on One's Own Imperialism

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The essay mixes the genre of autoethnographic reflections with an attempt to conceptualize the challenge that members of the Russian academic community in exile are facing on both individual and collective levels. It frames the questions of responsibility, guilt, and identity transformation, and

traces the evolution of my personal responses to them as an attempt to document and conceptualize the unavoidable shift in the research field, agenda, positionality, and methods that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought to Slavic/area studies.

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The war in Ukraine transcends mere physical conflict; it is a battle of narratives, spatial histories, and concepts. It brings into question the origins of the modern state, the legal rights of modern governmentality, and the history and geography of Western modernity. This struggle involves collective and personal imperialism, post-colonial activism, and a reevaluation of the modern state. As it enters its third year, the war illuminates the fissures where this violent tragedy originates. Endless discussions in the media, on social media, and at academic conferences examine the Russian state as the system which has produced this violence, leading to the wars in what we used to call 'the former Soviet space'; the knowledge production that justifies those wars and violence; and the societal constellations which have made it grow to an almost unstoppable extent. The questions of responsibility, personal and collective; grief, personal and collective; as well as actions, personal and collective, which led to the catastrophe, are yet to be named, conceptualized, and, hopefully soon, historicized. It would be an understatement to say that the war has impacted academic knowledge production at the levels of research ethics and relationship to the overall research agenda in former Slavic Studies as well as institutional connections and relationships. These long-awaited changes' rapid infusion into the research field is intensified by the private conversations and reflections that are dividing what remains of Russian civil society both inside and outside Russia.

This essay lies at the intersection of discussions on the essence and routes of Russian neo-imperialism, personal and collective responsibility and guilt, and how these perform themselves, especially in circles of the new Russian emigration. The methodology, or, better to say, the approach, that is at the core of this essay is self-ethnographic. As I find it unproductive, provoking, and unethical to produce another round of discussions on

'good' and 'bad' Russians, I instead turn my gaze onto myself. Here, I hope to start revealing the long and still ongoing process of deep transformation and reflection, personal as well as professional, that has come over me, a researcher of Russian origin working in Western academia who used to center her own career on Russia. Taking full responsibility for the less-than-ideal timing of this essay and for a variety of weak points in my logic and argumentation, I nonetheless find it important to turn my own gaze on my work, identity, and actions in an attempt to find the way to proceed.

I was never trained as an ethnographer, but, working in the bordering academic field of political and cultural geography, I learned the defining importance of 'the field' as a place where you do your research and collect the data, and the mechanics of self-reflexivity necessitated by it. The last decades, though, have radically changed the modernist understanding of the 'field,' influenced by a wide spectrum of online and offline research practices and the decolonizing of ethnography as scientific enquiry.

In modernity, the physical space between the 'field' and the 'home base' was crucial (as in the classic imperial-colonial relationships) and functioned as part of the colonial mode of knowledge production. Western white men produced academic knowledge about various 'others,' the only knowledge accepted as rational by Western modernity. The researchers' belonging to a 'more progressive' society situated far away produced an inequality of power (Walsh 1998). Today, the physical distance between the researcher and their subject has decreased, provoking a new round of discussions on postcolonial ethnographic methodology. The physical space between the 'field' and the 'home base' in classic colonial ethnographic knowledge production has transformed into a conceptual space between the researcher and the subject of their study; the source of power shifts from physical distance to conceptual space. Whatever strategy one chooses to minimize this physical distance and to reshape the power balance in this knowledge production relationship in order to be more inclusive of local knowledge systems, agendas, and perspectives, the conceptual distance is pre-defined at the level of the academic system. This space, however, is also intertwined with the questions of the researcher's identity and origin, and their unbalanced power to represent the Other gained by belonging to a particular academic system.

This space starts with the question of voice, its timeliness, and the appropriation of those voices by the researcher. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine this space between the researcher and their subject or, more generally, between one with the privilege of the voice and those to whom this voice belongs, became heavily emotionally charged. In other words, the self-identity and positionality of those who have the power to represent others define the conceptual space and are inseparable from those representations. In some cases, the necessity of conceptualizing this space pushes the researcher forward; in other cases, it just intertwines with it.

In my case, the need to identify myself, to locate myself on the

spectrum of various positions in a dramatically changed world, has set my research agenda. I have been working on Russia for more than fifteen years; moreover, I worked *in* Russia for more than fifteen years, mostly in hard-to-reach areas of the Russian Arctic.

The ongoing war has significantly changed my research interests and focus. I have started to look at, first, the geographical narratives developed in Russia to support the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and, second, the new waves of Russian emigration. The latter interest was provoked by my glaring feeling of not belonging among recent émigré circles and my conscious strategies of avoiding any possible reproduction of Moscow and Russian networks, spaces, and personal connections. If we come back to the notion of ethnographic distance and the classic process of colonial ethnographic *othering*, I would phrase my question as follows: why I am turning my former colleagues and friends into research objects, consciously avoiding reproducing familiar social and professional connections? Why do I bother them, and which distance (physical or conceptual) am I widening to potentially put myself in the position of a researcher?

This uncertainty in the field of identity and belonging is not new to me. There have been times when I put a lot of conscious effort into maintaining a lifestyle between two countries. Back then, I could not understand that this was a huge privilege, and not only a financial one. But such 'normal' pre-COVID mobilities have been forever lost. I lived in France—and went back to Russia; I studied and worked in the United Kingdom—and did work in Russia. This lifestyle stretched beyond simple traveling back and forth, as I had been working in Russia, in the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East for years. Living in two countries and engaging with multiple places is a privilege that comes with the responsibility of maintaining relationships and a feeling of belonging when you are elsewhere.

This *feeling* of belonging is linked to an inner feeling of being surrounded and understood by people with shared values (rather than being merely tolerated by them) that creates a certain basis for one's identities. I was 'a Muscovite' during my fieldwork in Russian regions, 'French' in the UK, and, most often, 'Scandinavian' whilst living in France, but these artificial constructions imposed by others' cultural and societal expectations had little to do with how I felt. I developed courses, implemented them in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and facilitated scientific and art cooperation between different countries and regions. I went to protests and volunteered for human-rights NGOs. That is who I was. My role was clear (at least to me), and navigating 'the field'—or the distance between my identity and the field—was a task to be done within the existing academic status quo. Now, when I look back, I have tons of issues with this status quo and my lack of a critical approach towards it.

In May 2022, I made the following note in my diary:

'I am boarding my Ryanair flight from Germany to Greece for the summer holidays with my daughter, as any other European middle-class family. Who am I, a 35-year-old "other white" female who used to have lofty goals and now is just happy because she secured a stable job in a project that she doesn't enjoy that much in Europe?'

At that point, I did not have an answer to this question. It came to me several months later. My drift from the place-based national modernist identity construction into which I was born to a post-modernist 'new nomadic' self-identity as an international postdoctoral researcher was taking place against the backdrop of Putin's regime becoming increasingly authoritarian. Wording an answer to the 'Where do you come from?' question and then learning how to speak up from the point of this newly developed identity were aborted with the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. It took me months to land in this search and understand that I was first and foremost Russian. I am not a researcher *on* Russia anymore because, as many others, I had to change my area of expertise and started to contribute to the creation of knowledge on and increase of Western interest towards other former Soviet republics.

To embrace the responsibility of being a Russian has a very conscious ethical choice. I agree with Hannah Arendt's (2009) point on personal and collective responsibility, but I do not use her arguments to distance myself from Russia's regime and join the ranks of the 'good Russians.' Rather, I employ them to discern those parts of my Russian life where I felt I could have unconsciously, by my own arrogance, contributed to fascist Russian propaganda and its justification of the full-scale invasion. It took me several months to conceptualize what I meant by this beyond an ethical and moral choice.

I was raised in a system of mixed holidays that do not reflect any particular confession. Our family holiday calendar would mix Catholic Christmas, Slavic *Maslenitsa*, Catholic and Orthodox Easter, and the long May holidays between 1 May (Labor Day) and 9 May (Victory Day). Did I ever question this eclectic, strange mix of holidays? My family was very close to Soviet dissident circles, and I was raised to be strongly critical of the government. But during our family dinners, when we talked about the origins of state terror, did we ever touch upon the war in Chechnya or the civil wars in Georgia and Tajikistan in the 1990s? Did we express our protest loud enough when Tskhinvali was invaded in 2008? Did we ever talk about the rights of the peoples of the North, and how they are constantly violated? I am glad that there are people who can answer yes to this question, but I am afraid that I am not one of them. Decades of unconscious imperialism and privilege, as well as the lack of security and self-confidence to be more politically active and socially conscious, are part of my Russian identity, and I am now putting a lot of effort into revealing them in myself. It is a long path that I am traveling together with my friends and colleagues, who help me hear/see, analyze, and eradicate my artificial superiority, imperialism, and arrogance. I am making mistakes along the way, and working in Georgia and Central Asia over the past couple of years has helped me to reveal and reflect on them.

I do not want this narrative to be seen as a new definition of the 'good Russians' and thus contribute to tearing apart Russians in exile. The battle over who is the true Russian is not my battle. Here, I am rather trying to conceptualize what parts of my upbringing and ignorance could

have led to the unconscious absence of an articulated critical political position towards the development of neo-imperialism in Russia. I want to understand what constitutes my responsibility in this regard, how this responsibility is divided between my professional and personal selves, and in what ways they feed each other. I am afraid that in this moment of professional and personal re-evaluation, I am struggling to separate those in a healthy way. I do not have a ready-made recipe.

As a person, I try to learn from people around me when I am in cities where there are many Russian migrants: listen to the protests against Russians, learn languages, and approach the regional and local voices to which I failed to listen previously. And I am constantly slipping. On a train in Uzbekistan, during a conflict with locals, I switch to Russian and am annoyed that I am not understood.

As a researcher, I do pretty much the same, providing space for self-positionality and reflection in my work, and trying not to feed into the Western academic trend of hastily relocating fieldwork planned for Russia to the now-overcrowded South Caucasus and Central Asia, and taking a lot of time and space before I voice any thoughts or ideas.

Here, we come across the question of *voice*.

How does one speak today after they have realized that they are Russian? How can one develop a voice from this position? And what conscious actions can one take, aside from giving material aid to Ukraine? 'The good Russian voice now is silent,' a good Georgian friend of mine told me, and I could not agree more. I read stories of Russian emigrants who shifted from academic and cultural positions to completely different jobs where they do not have so much power and such a large audience—and I respect them for that. The silence here is a conscious absence.

But the problem with silence is that it twists history and memory, warps them, turns them out of shape (Etkind 2013), and scholarship on memory and trauma tells us that silencing is not a solution (Assmann 2011). The silence of an individual as a response to a traumatic experience leads to concealment; this has dire consequences, and even more so when it is produced and reproduced by a community, especially within an intellectual community. Silencing creates space that can be easily taken over—and the question is, By whom? By formerly suppressed voices and narratives from the South Caucasus or Central Asia, or by narratives of Russian propaganda? However, for a silence to be loud, one's voice must have some power and weight in the community, otherwise its silence remains unnoticed. I am not sure that I have enough weight for the absence of my voice to be heard. If I stay in the professional field of academia, *not doing* is not the right answer.

For me, the correct approach to academic silence consists in providing space for others to speak, rather than merely absenting oneself. While interviewing residents of Tbilisi last year, one of the questions I asked was whether Russians should speak out—against the war or Putin's regime—loudly (in other words, whether the Russian voice should be heard), or, on the contrary, whether they should remain silent. The spectrum of answers

I received was incredibly broad, and this question occupies professional discussions to this day. Is the origin of the voice more important than its substance? What level of engagement and cooperation is ethically enough to ensure that Russians do not impose their (research) agenda on Georgia? How can we counterbalance the increasing presence of Russians in Georgian societal, economic, and cultural life? The Russian voice has a long history of being heard, prioritized, and dominant over other voices in what we used to call the former Soviet space; even today, the voice of Russians in exile is fairly loud in comparison with the voices of those who are living through the ongoing war (first and foremost, Ukrainians), or those who have been living in the shadow of previous Russian invasions (as Georgia has, for example). This inequality goes back centuries and rests on deep economic and social inequalities in the post-Soviet space. To unpack them on a structural level, we need to engage with post-Soviet postcolonial debates, which I do at a later stage in this essay.

If we take a step back and switch from individual reflections to the response of Russian scholars in exile, how do we approach the ongoing absence of collective reflection and critical re-evaluation—on structural, institutional, and discursive levels—of pre-war academic knowledge production in Russia? The trauma of emigration, attempts to reproduce familiar networks and routines, and leaning on one's circle of friends are completely understandable. Silence and shock as individual responses are also comprehensible. However, the same actions appear different if done by professional academics instead of by a group of individuals. The reproduction of Russian academic institutions 'in exile' and the absence of a joint critical program of reflection is alarming. While many articles have been written on Putin's distortion of memory, history, and social processes, and while academics who stayed in Russia are cut off from the international intellectual community, academics in exile have failed to produce a solid alternative narrative under which to put our signatures.

Reclaiming my Russian identity should have probably left me feeling unity with and belonging among newly emigrated anti-regime Russians in exile. However, it has not. Quite the opposite: I have never felt so isolated and resentful about being part of emerging cultural, political, and social projects. The immediate reproduction of familiar circles, institutions, and networks is a very logical collective mode of behavior in immigrant circles. However, my gut reaction to the growing Russian émigré presence—with its reproduction of institutions, schools, social circles, practices, and never-ending tours of anti-war musicians and authors—is to see it as a threat on an emotional level and strategically hasty and ill-considered on a rational one.

Coming back to the question of voice and its positionality, most Russian voices that are developing right now outside Russia are marked by an anti-war position. The West had enough power to establish a ground rule for Russian citizens looking to leave Russia for the West: explicit opposition to the war. However, in some countries which have experiences of the

Soviet occupation, an explicit anti-war position is not enough. Georgians, for example, as I have shown, also require that Russians develop an explicit anti-imperial position, followed by an articulated and well-informed position on the occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.

Research into Russian emigration is growing quite fast and is dominated by sociological approaches looking at emigrants' everyday strategies, adaptation, and political views. The angle on which I have decided is different: it centers around the impact of the Russian emigration on the receiving societies and *their* perception of the Russians. This is an improvement in that centering academic research on Russians in exile reproduces the long-time centering of 'Slavic' or 'post-Soviet' area studies on Russia. However, if we come back to the notion of ethnographic distance and the classic process of colonial ethnographic othering, what I thus do is turn my former colleagues and friends into objects of my research, consciously avoiding involvement in a reproduction of familiar social and professional connections. Why do I other them, and what is the position that I occupy by doing so? My reflections on this professional choice cannot be separated from my ongoing research.

The approach that I pursue originates from interviews that I started to conduct in Georgia for another project. When I was talking to various people in Tbilisi in the summer of 2022, all our conversations turned towards the topic of how drastic the impact of Russian emigration on Tbilisi had been and how it had torn apart the life of the city. Words like 'third occupation,' 'neo-imperialism,' and 'Russian arrogance' were used constantly, and I could not make sense of them at that point. That was perhaps the sincerest moment of academic and personal curiosity and enquiry that I had ever had in my career: I put a lot of genuine effort into attempts to hear, understand, and conceptualize the social resistance towards Russian presence in Georgia. So, trying to find my own place on the spectrum of post-war Russian identities, I chose to see what is perceived as imperial and arrogant in Russians by Georgians and to voice it. Does my research go beyond ethically correct curiosity, or am I seeking to appropriate the argumentation of my interviewees to distance myself from 'the Russians'?

Several periods of extended fieldwork in Tbilisi have shown me that the waves of Russian emigration in Tbilisi are dramatically reshaping the social and economic life in the city by enforcing (neo)imperial inequalities. The linguistic and physical dominance of Russians in Tbilisi triggers the national trauma of the Imperial and Soviet occupations; it also reinforces the perceived threat of a new Russian invasion. Differences in the political cultures of Russian and Georgian civil societies make Russian political activism invisible to Georgians, and Russian immigrants are therefore perceived as politically passive. Initiatives and projects launched and realized by Russians quite often serve the Russian bubbles and operate in the Russian language. Certainly, as already mentioned, it is a standard practice in immigrant circles to preserve old connections, practices,

language, and social capital.

However, what is different in the case of Russian emigrants in Georgia is that they come from a historically very privileged—and not fully acknowledged—position of power and imperial dominance. The aspect of Russian neo-imperialism that was of the most interest to me lay in the body language of Russians in Tbilisi. 'I always know if it is a Russian person walking down a street'; 'They occupy the whole street when they walk'; 'They are loud': these quotes from my interviews showed me that the problem of Russians in Georgia goes beyond differences in political cultures and the long history of un-self-aware imperialism. Russian (neo) imperialism in Georgia appears on the level of individual and collective actions, and on the level of corporeal dynamics. And who is to define what is (neo)imperialism if not those who suffered from several centuries of Russian and Soviet occupation?

This resistance towards growing Russian neo-imperialism started to feel personal, and I began to be more and more engaged. What am I doing? The convincing narrative which I tell myself is that I am using my Western academic privilege and my still-quiet-loud Russian voice to represent the subaltern. That I exercise good academic practice with my Georgian colleagues by making their concerns about Russian (neo) imperialism in Georgia heard. But maybe I am just appropriating the convenient discourse of Georgian trauma to distance myself from Russians and from Russia's regime? Equally often, I am accused of being Russia-phobic by my Russian colleagues, and of repressing Georgian voices by speaking up 'for' Georgians who can speak up for themselves. Probably the truth is someone in between.

The twisted space between my identity, my research position, and my academic agenda fluctuates with my attempts to conceptualize the practice of self-decolonization but does not create a void, a demarcating line between 'good' and 'bad' Russians. Decolonization in my work starts with methods, ethics, and self-decolonization, which shrinks the conceptual space of the 'field' and probably assigns me the role of an activist. Otherwise, I feel like I would be continuing to impose decolonization on émigré circles from the outside, joining the crowds of academics who were forced to move from Russia to countries 'of the near abroad.' And while I am on the road to figuring out what layers of unconscious imperialism I possess, I can say for sure that decolonization stretches far beyond decentralizing Area Studies and learning other languages. 'Start with yourself' may sound banal, but it doesn't hurt to try.

If we scale back again and use this self-reflection as one of many, the questions that this essay poses concern both the issue of individual and collective responsibility, and the conscious uses of structural advantages that Russian scholars still have in comparison with scholars from other former Soviet republics for developing decentralized perspectives on the history, geography, and society of Russia, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union.

How do we facilitate discussion, dialogue, and joint knowledge production between subalterns, or between what we used to call 'peripheries' and 'the center,' and what role should Russian academics in exile play in these processes? These are the crucial questions that draw on the different aspects of positionality, ethics, activism, and self-reflection which have become an inseparable part of area studies research since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine created an immense crisis in the former Soviet space, resulting in hundreds of thousands of casualties and millions of displaced people. Turning one's gaze to individual choices and actions seems to be one of the few strategies that can shift one's perspective away from accusation and judgement towards the Other towards self-reflection and individual responsibility. Therefore, the closing remarks here only refer to myself, as a researcher and as an individual. As we enter the third year of the war, I feel that I am drifting through the processes I have outlined above and that my position as a researcher and as an individual is also developing. I do not think any more that Russian voices must universally keep silent, but neither do I agree that our main efforts should center around reproducing Russian networks, institutions, and spaces. I feel (and know through my research in Georgia) that the old, blindly reproduced lifestyles that were very often a survival strategy for Russians in the first two years of emigration must now become far more self-critical and less arrogant.

1. I use the word 'Russians' in this text to imply first and foremost Russian citizens rather than ethnic Russians. The discussion on the relation of 'Russian people' to 'Russian citizens,' and 'Russians' is necessary, though twisted and complicated. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, in this text I use the simplified and generalized notion of 'Russians,' being fully aware of the conceptual limitations of this approach.

2. When I fill in official forms about myself, 'other white' is the ethnic category I belong to.

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Sofia Gavrilova is a human and political geographer of the post-Soviet spaces. For the past six years, she has been working in the field of human geography and social anthropology of post-Soviet countries, focusing on the production of 'military landscapes,' 'the North,' border regions, and peripheries during and after socialism, and their representation. Her doctoral research project at the University of Oxford analyzed the production of places in Russian regional museums in the transformational period between socialism and Russian capitalism. Her next project looked at the production of public geographical knowledge in the Soviet Union and Russia. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sofia started to work on the influence of Russian emigration on the society and economy of Georgia, and on the authoritarian geographies of Putin's regime. Now Sofia is a postdoctoral researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig.

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