



## WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

### History of an Opening and Handling of a Closure: Possible Ways of Social Anthropological Research on Russia Today

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**Abstract:** The termination of cooperation with Russian institutions and travel restrictions after February 24, 2022, have closed access to the Russian field for social anthropologists based in Western countries, affecting both individual careers of researchers and entire projects. Diverse methodological, ethical and organizational issues have challenged anthropologists with expertise on Russia since this historic collapse.

So, what are the possible directions for the future of social anthropological research on Russia by researchers based in the West? Can we find ways of handling the closure and the subsequent impossibility of going on with the classical ethnographic fieldwork on the ground by doing research “from a safe distance”? Or, should we rather turn our attention to what has been done by Western anthropologists during the opening of Russia in the roughly three decades between the fall of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the war against Ukraine?

This panel intends to provide an opportunity to continue the much-needed discussion about possible ways of social anthropological research on Russia, that has been in focus of several previous academic events and publications in the recent two years. The organizers invite contributions that reflect on own experiences of switching to and applying alternative approaches to “being there” methods, on epistemological effects of such methodological shifts, on the role of digital media/technologies for the continuation of research, as well as on reassessments of data collected in Russia before that war and/or dwell on the history of countries’ openings and closures to “outside” inquiries in general.

## SESSION SCHEDULE

### Monday, September 23, 2024 | Slot 1 | Room 1

*Peter Schweitzer: Who Can Get to the “Field” and Back Again? Toward a Political History of Field Access in Siberian Anthropology*

*Olga Povoroznyuk: Revisiting Post-Soviet Anthropological Research in the Russian North*

*Jeremy Morris: New forms of international triangulation in anthropology about the Russian field*

*Mikhail Popov: Present-day anthropological research on the Chulym area: problems, prospects, practices*

*Victor Trofimov: Double-edged Sword of Censorship: Reflections on Attempting Fieldwork in Russia*

*Elena Davydova: Collaboration amid Contradictions: Reflections on Doing Social Anthropological Research on Both Sides of the New Border*

## **SESSION PAPERS**

### **Who Can Get to the “Field” and Back Again? Toward a Political History of Field Access in Siberian Anthropology**

*Peter Schweitzer*

As I have described elsewhere, Siberian studies since the 18th century till the present have been characterized by a succession of “openings” and “closures” regarding field access for researchers from outside Russia (Schweitzer 2002, 2024). One aim of the presentation is to analyze this historical record regarding strategies to keep researchers out of Siberia or prevent them from publishing their results. At the same time, the history of Siberian anthropology is full of examples of individuals sent against their will to Siberia, some of whom became prominent contributors to the field of Siberian studies. In short, the historical record of doing or not doing research in Siberia is a prominent example of how the development of a field science cannot be understood while ignoring the politics of research.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 has made these historical and theoretical observations into matters of utmost concern for people inside and outside of Siberia, including researchers. Thus, the presentation will attempt to raise the question arises what we can learn from previous periods of restricted access. Can we use lessons from the past in order to deal as good as possible with the current period of closure and, at the same time, be prepared for future openings?

### **Revisiting Post-Soviet Anthropological Research in the Russian North**

*Olga Povoroznyuk*

Following the dissolution of the USSR, the Cold War lines that had divided the Arctic seemed to be gone. An increasing number of pan-Arctic research projects, growing academic cooperation and exchange and joint publication efforts, involving institutions and individuals from the Russian and the “western” Arctic, enabled the construction of the Circumpolar North as a global region. This optimistic vision overshadowed more cautious research perspectives on the “new Arctic” as an arena of latent competition and militarization. Russia’s ongoing attack on Ukraine and withdrawal from Arctic cooperation

and escalating geopolitical tensions have had dramatic implications for local communities, as well as for academic ties, and research practices.

The paper aims at revisiting anthropological research that have been conducted in the Russian North in the Post-Soviet period. It will address the question: How should we best deal with the growing political, institutional, and informational divides between the Russian and the “western” Arctic? Thus, it will elaborate on ethical, methodological, and epistemological options for keeping contacts with Russia-based colleagues and interlocutors and managing and contextualizing of the “old” data gathered before the war. Additionally, it will explore emerging methodologies and epistemologies of doing “remote” ethnography of the Russian North. Drawing on own research experience in academia in Russia and in Austria, the author will reflect on how the war has reconfigured research plans in and collaborations with Russia.

### **New forms of international triangulation in anthropology about the Russian field**

Jeremy Morris

Often Russian emigres with journalistic contacts within Russia are presented as the only arbiters of social knowledge about Russia. Anthropology risks being eclipsed completely by the rise of the Russia[n]-whispering pundit. To paraphrase a conversation between a prominent journalist interviewing the most prominent public intellectual in Berlin in June 2023: it doesn't matter so much that one is denied access to the so-called field, it's enough to continue excavating the subtext of the documentary evidence. It would take 10 years to lose a 'feel' for the field. Biblical exegesis replaces direct object. Barely skipping a beat, apart from to joke about taxi drivers' insider knowledge for anthropological extraction, the pair converse about 'what is going on in the souls of the Russians', concluding baldly, we can hardly know anything about the social situation in Russia.

If trained anthropologists aren't primally screaming by now, they should reflect on the too-ready acceptance of the devaluation and dismissal of 'it's too difficult' when it comes to maintaining the production and dissemination of ethnographic knowledge about Russia. So what can we do? In this paper I propose thinking triangularly. Triangulation has a number of meanings in the social sciences, but I propose an ethical and connectively-relational one specific to the geopolitical walls our era will increasingly be characterized by. While institutional collaboration may continue to be a legal impossibility, triangulation of researchers in 'hostile' countries with the 'field' as the third node are a way of thinking about connectiveness. The rest of the paper concerns how to make these triangles ethical, productive and para, or even post-institutional, while still protecting the hard-won privileges of their participants' possible organizational situating.

### **Present-day anthropological research on the Chulym area: problems, prospects, practices**

Mikhail Popov

One of the main constants in the anthropological research on the Chulym Turks' culture was always the imbalance between written sources and modern fieldwork. The huge amount of data accumulated during expeditions of the Soviet period provided the

broadest opportunities for its research, but actual fieldwork was rare and problematic even in the pre-2022 period.

Before 2022, this imbalance was rather a problem; in modern conditions, it could be an advantage for a researcher outside the Russian Federation: at least partially we still have an opportunity to study some topics on Chulyum Turks' culture - insofar as we have pre-collected data (both from the Soviet period and the 2010s).

On the other hand, - the opposite aspect is also obvious here. Chulyum studies always leaned towards folkloristics rather than social anthropology; so without the possibility of fieldwork, this bias threatens only to intensify. So: it's possible to work on the pre-collected data; but how can we work here in the sphere of anthropology, not pure ethnography?

In addition, the post-2022 situation creates some problems in research ethics.

The interaction between a foreign researcher and Russian informants today is becoming extremely complicated. You can either rely on the works of Russian colleagues - which, again, implies the use of indirect data; or try to work with informants remotely - but here arise other problems. It's difficult to find a way to speak even with a well-disposed informant without jeopardizing his safety; or, on the other hand, speak openly as a foreign researcher with the informant. So, the key question here is: how to talk to an informant in a situation where people generally prefer not to talk about anything?

## **Double-edged Sword of Censorship: Reflections on Attempting Fieldwork in Russia**

Victor Trofimov

In this presentation, I aim to reflect on my recent attempt of doing fieldwork in Russia regarding current methodological, epistemological and ethical challenges. The fieldwork should have been done in the context of the doctoral study of webcam sex industry and webcam sex work in Russia. The aim of the study is to determine the place of webcam sex industry within Russia's informal economy, identify material and non-material reasons why young Russians may choose work in webcamming and find out how the webcam models negotiate their occupation in the context of the Russian state's politics of traditional values.

In practice, conducting fieldwork in, and on, Russia became nearly impossible both because of the current geopolitical and geosexual conflict, and epistemological bias regarding the research on sexuality and sex work in Russia and the West. Polemically, I call this bias "a double-edged sword of censorship". So, while Sweden banned all business travel to Russia in 2022, thus making physical fieldwork unfeasible, the Swedish Ethical Review Authority also forbade me to conduct interviews with Russian webcam models online, citing concerns about their psychological health. In my opinion, these concerns are grounded primarily in the (hetero-)normative view of sex work as inherently abusive and exploitative. At the same time, a Russian research foundation disinvited me from a summer camp for fieldworkers, likely because of their unwillingness to host a researcher from a Western university and deal with the topic that may appear too risky in the context of current repression of sexuality in Russia.

The paper should argue that current limitations and self-limitations seriously curtail our ability to conduct the research in Russia, thus making understanding, and explaining, contemporary Russian society hardly possible.

## Collaboration amid Contradictions: Reflections on Doing Social Anthropological Research on Both Sides of the New Border

Elena Davydova

Ethnographic fieldwork presupposes collaboration with research participants that involves trust, common interests, and mutual benefits. After 22 February 2022, not only was the world divided, but my fieldsite seemed to be heavily influenced by political agenda. Things like affiliations, research funding or even ethnic identity do matter in the whole fieldwork process nowadays. I did the fieldwork in Chukotkan settlements in 2022-2023 on behalf of the Russian institution, applying classical “being there” methods. Now, as a pre-doctoral researcher at the University of Vienna, I switched to distant ethnography maintaining contacts with informants with the help of digital technologies and monitoring local media resources. In this presentation, I will reflect on my personal experiences of remote and on-the-ground research in the Iul'tinskii district of Chukotka over the past two years. On the one hand, I will analyse the unexpected and sometimes confusing collaborations from the perspective of the closed side. In particular, I will show that social anthropological research practices and ethical concerns of Russian anthropologists (affiliated with Russian institutions) were also affected by the ongoing military actions and new discourses. On the other hand, I will describe my current struggles, confuses, perplexities and hopes while doing research at a safe distance. Building on analysis of particular interactions with research participants, I will discuss the potential ways through which collaboration between people on both sides of the ideological divide is still possible.