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Should Have Known

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When the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski arrived in the Trobriand Islands in 1915, he was an Austro-Hungarian subject in a British territory at risk of internment. Stranded there, he stayed put and turned this long-term presence into the instrument that defines social anthropology even today. But World War I was not the only war that shaped his work in a profound manner: from archaeological work coming out recently we know that the kula, the intricate ceremonial exchange system he described as proof of the universality of rational human thought, was in fact a colonial phenomenon, the result of a decades-long pacification process.

In recent years, this story has gained a new twist for me. Anthropology has come a long way from what it was in that explicitly colonial context, when it mostly engaged with communities far from metropolitan centers. Distance itself,

whether geographic, class-based, or epistemic, has been problematized in myriad ways. But there is something in the position of the contemporary observer whose craft is based on linking quotidian, modest scales of observation to large-scale processes. Geopolitics can feel like the background against which our work unfolds; we use it crudely and take some of it for granted. But the past few years taught me that scales collapse in certain places and times, and you might find yourself playing the role of a witness.

I grew up in Budapest, but as an anthropologist, I came of age in Ukraine during the Donbas war. As I was developing the proposal my PhD research would be based on, protesters gathered on the Maidan. By the time I got news that I had secured the funding, an unnamed war broke out. I arrived in Lviv in West Ukraine in 2015, a few months after the second Minsk agreement froze the front lines. I wanted to study the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent political and economic transformation through the lens of debates around heritage and urban governance. Lviv was 1,200 kilometers from Sloviansk where Igor Girkin, the military spin doctor and veteran of wars in Transnistria and Chechnya, first led militants to storm the city council on April 12, 2014.

Russian surface-to-air missiles, shady local business schemers becoming heads of puppet republics, a mixture of thugs and "political technologists" spinning wheels from Crimea to Kramatorsk, paid protesters, real protesters—the

undeclared Donbas war was disorienting from afar. In Lviv, I found myself seeking out the internally displaced, interviewing elderly residents of a care home, students from Eastern Ukraine, and veterans. My research assistant, a Luhansk native, recounted arduous and costly visits home through checkpoints whenever he visited his grandmother. Friends went to fight and returned. They spoke little of what happened. Later, I spent time in Kramatorsk with a friend who worked for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) monitoring mission and caught a glimpse of her burnout over the quality of the work they were able to provide.

These were pieces in an enormous puzzle at the fringes of my vision, something I sought out between ethnographic and archival work enmeshed in the local politics of Lviv. I had no better explanation for doing this than a gut feeling that this war was lurking in my ostensibly far-removed research world. But people's biographies led directly to the front. The distance between the Donbas and Lviv is nothing once you consider the two million displaced and hundreds of thousands of soldiers who would serve there before February 2022. The war radiated across the social fabric, regardless of the confusion and the lack of will or interest to see it, despite all the misinformation and prejudices.

Looking back on it all, the escalation seems like a straight line leading to only one future: the one we are living in right now. It is a striking, slow geopolitical unraveling, the end

of the post–Cold War status quo. It feels absurd not to have anticipated it with high confidence. This, of course, is an illusion, and one that tells us a lot about the extent to which the present moment retrospectively orders our attention, wading through unmetabolized experience and a cacophony of guesswork, motivated speech, misinformation, and rudimentary analysis. We could call it a fog of war in the epistemic sense, but if we flip this around, this fog is ever-present, the stuff of fieldwork, and navigating it is a predicament of any contemporaneous empirical research.

On paper, ethnography should be an exercise in radical openness. We are trained to let go of plans, to readjust and make space for the unexpected; we should be ready to shift focus when we notice that our assumptions have led us astray. But assumptions and patterns of attention are not that easy to catch—and here I am reminded of Malinowski again, the stranded contemporary, the enemy alien seeking order amid chaotic wartime change, unintentionally contraposing equilibrium to people with whom he worked, while his own world was on fire. When working in volatile contexts, facing something unprecedented, it is all too easy to look without realizing what you are looking at, lacking the political imagination and experience to prevent yourself from falling prey to wishful thinking, unprepared to read the signs. It is difficult even to select which signs to pay attention to in the first place.

I spent the last few months before the full-scale invasion in Kyiv. Life there felt like a pendulum swinging us between

spikes of anxiety and a defiant, hedonistic carelessness. As foreign friends were leaving, veteran acquaintances quietly prepared for the worst, and many in our circles opined that the US warnings were moves in a geopolitical game. The only way to orient ourselves would have been to systematically review intelligence reports, military analyses, and diplomatic communiqués; then cut through clutter and compare evidence. This is a disorienting, highly technical exercise, a full-time job if you want to take it seriously. Most of us lacked the specific literacy anyway. Crucially, most of us also lacked the knowledge of what war-in-the-making could look like. The future felt half-open, ominous.

I work with questions that used to have little to do with grand strategy or military maneuvers. In those months of tense limbo in Kyiv, I often came close to expecting a serious escalation, war spilling over from the Donbas, but even with hundreds of thousands of troops crowding the border, I never thought it would happen the way it eventually did. Arguably, my shock could be excused. But it felt like a professional failure anyway. This new reality radically altered the decade I lived through, changing what were meaningful signs and premonitions, calling into question patterns of common misinterpretation and ultimately raising concerns about the politics of these shortcomings.

My dilemmas about the limitations of ethnography and my own limitations were not about the fact of the invasion, per se. Instead, I felt the full-scale war exposed the frailties

of witnessing and observing, of the epistemic challenges of contemporaneity. I spent the past winter piecing together microhistories of single days, asking myself what I could have known, comparing it with the diary entries and field notes I took, staring at the gap between what turned out to be crucial and what I paid attention to—the places where my interests, assumptions led me astray. This is not an exercise in self-blame. Rather, it is a fraught attempt to learn something about the twin predicaments of living through and making sense of the war.

It was those intense months of limbo that prompted me to review my memories and material from the Donbas in a systematic fashion for the first time. Likewise, after February 2022, decade-old conversations with Indian soldiers in my first fieldwork or scenes from my prolonged stays in Israel and Lebanon would suddenly emerge in my mind, making sense in a new way. With my recently acquired literacy of societies at war, I wonder how certain details had not stood out to me when I encountered them, whether in East Jerusalem in 2012 or in Kramatorsk in 2016. Through these loops, these systematic reviews, it became easier to trace the outlines of how accumulated experiences fed back to who I am as an observer.

To work in this world, where our political imagination and experiential base are far outpaced by the events around us, I find I must be a bit like Baron Munchausen who pulled himself out of the puddle by his own hair. It takes serious

epistemic work to identify where it is that you are a reasonably equipped witness-observer, where your training, politics, and past experience might be an ally, and when you need to actively work against them. This has stakes everywhere, anytime. But in wartime, allowing the world to shatter what you thought were solid foundations seems the only intellectually honest way to both observe and participate.