**Not soft power, but speaking softly. 'Everyday diplomacy' in field relations during the Russia-Ukraine conflict.**

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**Abstract:**

In the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, this paper examines ethnographer and informants alike as unwilling ‘diplomatic’ representatives. It discusses political neutrality in field relations, indirect communication, and affective states that both facilitate and threaten ‘everyday diplomacy’.

Based on long-term fieldwork in Russia, but focussing mainly on the aftermath of the 2014 Malaysian airliner downing in Ukraine, this paper examines the individual ethnographer and informants alike as unwilling 'diplomatic' representatives in the field. Firstly, I discuss the authoritarian political context in Russia and how it affects the notion of ‘soft power’ and ‘public’ discourse. Then I relate the familiar 'political testing' experience of researchers by informants, and field-relation 'neutrality' (Ergun and Erdemir 2010). Next, I draw on the anthropology of indirect communication to characterise 'everyday diplomacy' after the event as 'silence' (Hendry and Watson 2000) but also civility. I go on to examine attendant affective states of 'tension, disturbance, or jarring' (Navaro-Yashin 2012) that both threaten diplomacy and enable it. Finally, I argue that classic ethnographic rapport building deserves further examination in the light of the porosity of politics, the social environment and the field.

**Keywords: everyday diplomacy, soft power, Russia, Navaro-Yashin, field relations, affect**

**Introduction**

I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in an area encompassing a *raion* (district)of small villages and industrial towns 4-hours from Moscow in Russia for the last six years and visited the place for many years prior to that. Most of my informants are blue-collar families who live in a socially compressed space of a few housing blocks in a deindustrialising former single-factory town, as well as a few rural dwellers.

The Ukraine conflict has been presented in state-controlled Russian media as a NATO conspiracy instigating a ‘neo-fascist’ coup in Kiev. When I returned in early summer 2014, I was sure this would affect field relations in some way – perhaps mostly with the older male and politically more engaged informants. As it turned out, I arrived back to the field shortly after the intensification of armed conflict in the East of Ukraine (June), a few months after the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia (March) and the Winter Olympics (February), and a few weeks (July 17th) before the downing by allegedly Russian supplied anti-aircraft units of a Malaysian airliner carrying Dutch passengers. These events became the subject of intense public ‘debate’, interpretation and media manipulation in Russia. This was particularly because they came hot on the heels of what was seen as a novel and rare Russian success in the field of deploying ‘soft power’ through the successful hosting of the Olympics. This adoption of a strategy to ‘attract and co-opt’ (soft power) (Nye 2004: 2) was in marked contrast to the usual interpretation of Russian foreign policy actions as coercive, neo-colonial or revanchist ([Tsygankov](http://www.tandfonline.com/author/Tsygankov%2C+Andrei+P) 2006). The ordinary citizen, and visiting ethnographer were loudly hailed by an unrelenting media campaign of counter-propaganda and – as it is called in Russia – ‘Black PR’ (sophisticated and comprehensive smear tactics) about the West. This was impossible to avoid as it took place on a multi-platform basis (mainstream state-controlled TV and by small armies of paid government bloggers on social media). As a society characterised by increasing authoritarian and coercive measures, people living in Russia have commensurately become the objects of the state’s revanchist great power rhetoric, xenophobia, and other strategies for masking or distracting from political failure at home. As Grix has recently argued, surveying the projection of the greatness of nation through the Sochi Winter Olympics, the primary audience for this display of soft power is domestic (Grix and Kramareva 2014; see also Persson and Petersson 2014). The sense of an individual’s political loyalty to the state being on ‘public’ display re-emerged in a form not seen since the Soviet period. In this state-saturated context, the everyday ‘diplomacy’ of field relations inevitably become more politically charged than normal, but also offers opportunities to connect the ethnographic turn in the anthropology of the state and the burgeoning work on intimacy-geopolitics in geography (Pain and Staeheli 2014).

There is of course a lot of social science literature on ethnographic field relations and not only in anthropology: the influence of a researcher’s gender, race, class, and so on features even more visibly in sociology. There is less writing explicitly devoted to the significance of a researcher’s origin ‘culture’ (perhaps partly due to ‘culture’ itself being the master concept of anthropology) and the influence of international relations, despite the rich literature in post-colonialism on centre-periphery relationships, structures of othering and subalternity. This paper in part reflects on the inescapability of one’s identity in the field as framed by national origin and international politics. In addition, it ponders the meaning and suitability of diplomatic metaphors for the researcher’s and informants’ positioning in such context. This is carried out on two levels: the researcher and researched are compared to normative understandings of ‘diplomacy’ – for example, to what degree must a diplomat remain open and cooperative in conduct at the same time as pursuing ‘transactional objectives’ (Rose and Wadham-Smith 2004: 34-55)? Secondly, the paper applies critiques made of agent-centric conceptualisations of international relations such as ‘soft power’ (Szostek 2014) to micro-scale field relations – actually existing politics are always at once structured by the much ‘weirder world’ (Kemper 2009) of embedded and enduring shared social values (Lock 2009), local contexts and meanings.

**Researcher as representing ‘soft power’ and political testing by the researched.**

Before talking in more detail about the way the conflict affected field relations, I outline some of the political testing that foreign researchers undergo in the field and the experience of the researcher as everyday purveyor of their origin country’s soft power. Soft power – a concept currently fashionable in political science of post communism, is defined by Nye (2004) as the ‘ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes’. This is most often linked to the manipulation and exploitation by a state of its perceived cultural and political values as instruments of foreign policy. Criticisms of the concept of soft power point that it relies on both structural and agentic interpretations simultaneously – how can it be ‘produced’ as a resource if it resides already in a cultural make up (Szostek 2014)? At the same time soft power is problematic because it presupposes positive or negative messages can be transmitted via media directly to change or persuade subjects’ values. This is a lot like the traditional notion of the hypodermic effect of advertising on individuals. By contrast the way media merely reflect and reinforce a priori shared values is generally overlooked. Terms like ‘latency’ or ‘affect’ appear pertinent to the understanding of field relations as ‘diplomacy’. But both these terms are relevant both to the western researcher’s status in the field in post-communist societies, and to the Ukraine crisis’ manipulation by Russia.

An English (or British)[[1]](#footnote-1) person doing research in Russia might appear to the visible embodiment of soft power. Generations of Russians have been brought up to respect British cultural achievements in literature particularly. A vague yet warm anglophilia reigns in the most varied social contexts. In what was a closed society that until very recently craved difference, the kind of foreignness the English researcher offered could, along with some Russian language skills and a sympathetic attitude, generate what Ergun and Erdemir call ‘cultural proximity’, and allow a researcher to cross over temporarily into partial ‘insider’ status which can build rapport, trustworthiness and openness (Ergun and Erdemir 2010: 18). For Ergun and Erdemir, the insider/outsider distinction is therefore ‘frequently situational, depending on the prevailing social, political, and cultural values of a given social context’ (Kusow 2003: 592, quoted in Ergun and Erdemir 2010). There are a number of recent reports by English-speaking researchers working on post-socialism that highlight the benefit to their research of their particular ‘foreignness’ (Katz 1994; Morris 2016; Walker 2011). This is related to both affective factors – born of the fondness of Russians for English culture, and is latent, in that it has built up over generations. On the other hand, what I call ‘political testing’ by informants has been part of doing research in Russia since the 1990s, as can be seen from the ethnographic encounters below.

**The cultural politics of research on Russia**

Particularly during the most recent Putin term as President of Russia (2012-), the voices of researchers who seek to highlight the everyday experience of Russians have been subject to marginalisation at best, as the political perspective dominates, as if the everyday and ethnographic were not also political.

This may seem strange to anthropologists elsewhere, but in a geographic area of study dominated by political science and international relations, ethnographic research on Russia is always going to provoke some unusual responses. If justifying ethnography to some area-studies colleagues is an exercise in overcoming suspicion, it has long been the case that fieldwork itself has been compared to espionage: ‘a shifty business carried out by individuals regarded by the general community with suspicion.’ (Hendry and Watson 2001: 1). And this is particularly true of Russia, where even the most ordinary people are highly − one might say genetically − attuned to the dangers of expressing an opinion to strangers. Ethnographic work on socialism and post-socialism has always been interpreted politically (Hann 2009: 135).

Given the politicised nature of Russian research, the question of the degree of ‘insiderness’ garnered by long-term immersion in the field is particularly important. In their examination of the researcher’s positionality in fieldwork in both Turkey and Azerbaijan, Ergun and Erdemir (2010) discuss how foreignness and cultural familiarity interact with research contexts. They summarise well some of the problems with insider status that are particularly relevant to the Russian context: an ‘insider, for example, may be perceived as being untrustworthy because of his or her knowledge of and connections to the community under study’ (Ergun and Erdemir 2010: 17). Outsider status may allow a degree of greater access (as well as distrust and disbelief by others).[[2]](#footnote-2) To give an example from my research, on visiting a German-owned lime kiln, two female technicians refused to speak to me, despite an introduction by a trusted third-party key informant gatekeeper. Did they genuinely believe that our conversations might get back to the director? Or is this a case of generalised social mistrust and fear. Whatever the case, Russian reality suggests that their fears are reasonable. While cross-cultural issues constitute the ‘elephant in the room’ for foreign area studies researchers working on Russia, outsider status can help not only to mitigate, but also to reverse the researcher–researched relationship, particularly when it is understood in terms of cultural exchange (Walker 2011: 216, 224). This is no less lessened as Russia moves further away from its closed past. What possible risk would there be from a foreigner – the status of whom in Russia is always viewed as contingent, powerless and temporary? It is worth here reiterating how in the state-saturated context of the Ukraine conflict, Kusow’s insider/outsider distinction might be particularly politically ‘situational’ (Kusow 2003: 592).

**The national patriot informant**

From some informants their response to the researcher after the Ukraine conflict was predictable based on their previous clearly expressed patriotic and anti-West views: Sasha is a long-standing key informant who has always enjoyed making combative and provocative statements about the decadent and treacherous West. For as long as I have been visiting Russia, informants like Sasha have readily made reference to geopolitical issues, British and US foreign policy, and in linking the researcher and origin country, history, and politics in the widest sense. Partly reflecting popular history broadcasting and publishing in Russia in the Soviet Union,[[3]](#footnote-3) informants have commented, seriously and jokingly about issues such as WWII: ‘where was the second front when we needed it?’ The ambiguous role of Britain as an ally to the USSR – as reflected in popular Russian history – is attached in conversation to the person of the researcher, albeit temporarily. More recently, in the late 1990s, British nationals in Russia were likely to encounter personal antagonism during the NATO bombing of Serbia. I recall not being able to avoid adopting a ‘public’ position in conversation with a group of informants then. In a discussion characterised by anger on the part of my interlocutors at NATO actions, I stated that ‘generally’ I was against the air campaign, without ruling out a view that military intervention of another form against Milosevic might be acceptable to me.

In current fieldwork, Sasha is representative of the politicised, national-patriot encountered. A former factory forklift driver and now eking out a living in the informal economy, Sasha, in one conversation in 2014 he expressed himself thus: ‘wait until winter. Over there in your Europe you’ll be cold and hungry enough when we cut your gas off. You’ll be begging us for breadcrumbs’. Sasha and his circle reflect some of the most disenfranchised Russians who readily latch on to official narratives about Russia’s renewal of greatness and the enemy of the West. They are partly the target group for state-controlled televisual framings of the conflict as a proxy for geopolitical victimisation of Russia and her refusal to be ‘bullied’. Putin here is presented as a rational, calculating and honest, if cunning, resistor of Western neo-imperialism. At the same time, when discussing aspects of domestic politics, they are extremely critical of the Russian government and Putin too.

This ‘group’ of informants if I can generalise, are well known for their perpetual ‘political testing’ of foreigners. In the best traditions of official state diplomacy, one possible response from the researcher is polite silence or ambiguous deflections (Blackman 2001). But how realistic is long term ‘field neutrality’ in such circumstances – when the researcher is from a country with a long history of political enmity or mistrust? As during the 1990s NATO intervention in Serbia, the current Ukraine conflict means researchers in Russia are unwillingly interpellated as national representatives - everyday diplomats, if you will.

My response to Sasha’s initially aggressive ‘testing’ or posturing on the Ukraine-Russia-sanctions issue was deflective – to avoid a response – silent even. However, as with the Serbian context, this was untenable – a semi-public-facing response had to emerge. This involved politely insisting that things were going to be fine in the UK and that we had our own gas supplies, and so on. Sasha quickly became much more like his usual self and ‘normal’ conversation continued without reference – at least for a while – to the conflict. Nonetheless the conflict had led to a re-interpretation of the researcher and researched as national representatives. Willingly or unwillingly, we had come to embody public diplomacy. Public diplomacy (of which ‘soft power’ is a recent scholarly sub-category) are about building credibility abroad through the display and demonstration of particularistic values and policies (Melissen 2005: 3). It is also about ‘openness and cooperation’. On the one hand, these diplomatic roles are similar to those normally adopted by the ethnographer: credibility is built with informants, rapport established with a means to an end, but tempered by ethical values that are supposed to be transparent and demonstrable to informants. The paradox of diplomacy therefore extends to ethnography – it is simultaneously means and ends directed activity. Hence the long-standing comparisons of ethnography with espionage and liminality. For ethnographers, like it or not, as for official representatives of a state who reside as aliens in another jurisdiction, ‘trust’ is a necessary by product of activity that has ‘transactional objectives’ (Rose and Wadham-Smith 2004: 34-35). Taking into account the intrusion of geopolitics into field relations, the diplomatic comparison appears equally apt.

Nevertheless, the metaphor breaks down, and in some respects necessarily so. Unlike the diplomat the informant and researcher alike can pursue various tactics not available to the official state representative. Firstly, and importantly, continual deflection through disavowal of the national representing role – ‘I am not a representative of my state’. But this, as indicated above, is not tenable over time as the usual response is: ‘yes, but what do you think about this conflict?’ More powerfully than disavowal is ‘silence’ and continuing ‘civility’ – two modes of indirect communication, both ‘diplomatic’, but equally available to researcher and researched as tools to resist interpellation by politics and open up avenues for alternative interpretation of cultural and national difference in the field. To a degree these responses by the researcher to Sasha’s kind of aggressive discourse are already suggested: what *could* one say in response? More or less my reaction was civility and silence over time when the topic came up in similar circumstances. For informants, this was also, increasingly, a micro-political response encountered. Silence and civility against the backdrop of international conflict involving people’s respective states is both self-censorship, but also pregnant with affective meaning: the beginning of the mutual acknowledgement of trauma of some kind. ‘Performing the script’ of national representative breaks down in the face of the inadequacy of politics to express the intimacy of field relations and vice versa. A quieter politics inevitably ensues (cf. Askins 2014 on the script performance of refugees, affect and friendship). Silence speaks to acknowledgement of the other in a way that open discussion and argument would not. While new meanings of globalised ‘intimacy’ are currently being calibrated in anthropology, which the accent put on the problem of differentiating ‘authentic’ from purely performative (Sehlikoglu, Aslı Zengin 2015: 23), the “‘deep’ knowledge of the field is also a realm of the intimate” (24). transnational intimacies are highly shaped by and embedded in specific social relations of inequality, based on perceived gender, ethnic, racial, national (23). As Pain and Staeheli suggest, the ‘stretching of intimate spaces’ – of private conversation – to accommodate geopolitical meaning should not verify the political as primary, but acknowledge the geopolitical itself as always already intimate and the mutli-scalar (Pain and Staeheli 2014: 345). However, before expanding on this, in addition, two other aspects of the conflict as reflected in changed field relations deserve attention.

**‘European’ and ‘Boeing’ metonymy: ‘we are the victims’**

Sasha’s use of the word ‘your Europe’ (alternatively given as your ‘West’, when in more combative mood) gives an indication of another group of interactions with informants. The Ukraine Maidan movement is of course associated with the desire for some Ukrainians to join the EU. A number of informants, while avoiding mention of the conflict itself, framed certain seemingly innocuous discussions in terms of the adjective ‘European’: Thus, a certain approach to child rearing, or choice of food, cooking or something else illustrated a ‘European mentality’. In the last couple of decades the adjective European has not been marked in this way in everyday discourse – if anything it is associated with ‘quality’ – the ‘Euro apartment’, ‘Euro food quality’. In this second subset of encounters it is possible to characterise this cultural distancing by informants as a proxy for discussing, or not discussing, the international conflict. Often these same informants had previously been some of the most reflexive about cultural difference and often more critical of their own culture and politics.

A corollary of the ‘European’ approach was when informants with ambiguous or critical viewpoints avoided expressing their disapproval of the Russian government – a very understandable approach – but instead talked about impending ‘punishment’ or catastrophe befalling their country as a result of the ‘Boeing’ (the type of airliner shot down over Ukraine) – note also the metonymic distancing in the use of this word. One woman, Marina, who had relatives in Moscow said: ‘I just hope it is quick. I wake up in the night thinking about a nuclear attack on Moscow. Hopefully they [the relatives] are close to the centre that they will all be killed outright.’ Another said, ‘I suppose we won’t see you again. We will be completely isolated now and they won’t let you come here.’ The ‘they’ were the all-powerful UK government, not the Russians. Externalising feelings of fear and stress to an outside punisher was a common reaction and in some ways inflects the ‘victimhood’ discourses adopted at a state level (Russia as the victim of NATO expansion and Atlanticist encirclement). In a politically highly charged environment, a focus on the reaction of the other, rather than the actions of one’s state was also understandable.

**Civility and Silence**

A third group, the vast majority of people, is characterised by absence or avoidance of talk about Ukraine and politics – and this relates back to both previous categories which were moments of ‘undiplomatic’ candour against a backdrop of silence and civility in talk – even with the aforementioned Sasha. While all of the previously mentioned exchanges, even the combative ones, were characterised by civility, this third group I particularly characterise as ‘civility and silence’. Nonetheless, like the examples of informants suddenly discovering another’s ‘Europeanness’ we can discern a form of indirect communication even in silence – for the forms it takes.

Summer is the season of Russian rural hospitality and I was busy travelling between industrial town and summer village. A number of informants whom I have followed in the winter, retreat to a holiday cottage for some or most of the summer. On the afternoon after the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner, in which 300 mainly Dutch holiday-makers were killed, I had been invited to give an English-language class to an ecological-village resort as a favour to a well-to-do informant gatekeeper who was a local entrepreneur. About twenty people took part. My role was to talk to them about everyday topics in English. Afterward the host Andrei made a short speech about how important it was to think of the most important things in life at ‘this difficult time’. Otherwise no political talk occurred. Andrei is rather wealthy and therefore generally keeps himself to himself; Russian society, especially in the village, is typified by envy and mistrust of those who have done well. Unusually, he made a show of hospitality which I had never been on the receiving end of before, despite doing him similar favours in the past. This was the first of a number of what I would call over-hospitable, and overly civil encounters in the next weeks.

Hospitality is a very important part of Russian culture – encompassing contradictory notions of ritual politeness (and therefore a certain concealment of self – (Parkes 2001) – and thus is comparable to the diplomat’s role), as well as genuine warmth and openness, particularly when outsiders are concerned. However, I have been part of most of my informants’ lives for so long that while welcoming and hospitable as a matter of course, most people in my field site don’t generally treat me the same way they would other foreigners – that is with the overwhelming hospitality characteristic of such encounters.

While at least partly coincidental, I am sure, there was something slightly troubling about the number of overly hospitable social gatherings I was invited to over the next few weeks, by both people I knew well and less well. Similar to hospitality, gift-giving, while a routine part of such social intercourse, suddenly loomed larger in my everyday encounters than before. A week or so after his outburst about our suffering in the UK as a result of the conflict, Sasha brought a keg of his home-made beer to me – a gesture rather out of character. This was the essence of meaningful civility and silence. We all made an effort ‘not to mention the war’ which carried on in front of us on the ubiquitous kitchen televisions where the official media endlessly and vocally was presenting it as a proxy conflict between East and West, between European and Russian worldviews. In terms of indirect communication the ‘meaning’ of these hospitable encounters can be as ambiguous as any official diplomat’s difficult audience with a representative of a foreign power: displaying one’s sense of dignity and supposedly higher values regardless of circumstances; making a statement that politics is beneath personal relations; perhaps silence and civility can be intended even as a display of cultural superiority or alternatively inferiority.

Only twice was the spell of civility broken, both times in company that included people I’d not met before. In the first case a conversation with highly educated informants turned to talk of how the Ukrainian people did not constitute a historical entity. This was something like a red rag to me, and I lost my temper – I certainly couldn’t be accused of being diplomatic or speaking softly in my response – something I had been at pains to maintain in my ‘front stage work’ previously, to adopt the language of Goffman. Nonetheless the conversation was steered away and civility reigned again. The second time was a village barbeque on 2 August 2014 – Annual Paratroopers Day: a high point in the patriotic calendar. A local football coach and ex-paratrooper had had too much to drink and asked me with a smile whether I really believed the western propaganda that a Russian missile had brought down the airliner. The host Boris, also an ex-para, quickly retorted: ‘I am sure he has his own opinions and that they are different to ours. We should respect his silence on this; no one has to talk about it.’

**Tension, disturbance or jarring**

This brings me to the final discussion of the effect of the conflict on field relations: affective states of ‘tension, disturbance or jarring’ (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Navaro-Yashin here talks about how the physical environment can provoke emotional responses in a post-war polity – particularly the objects and houses of the defeated enemy. She speaks of the ‘phantomic’ in terms of the spectral yet visible and tangible affect produced by abandoned Greek-Cypriot homes. In the case of my field site the (geo-)political environment – made tangible in the overwrought propagandising of the Russian state to its citizens – disturbs and is in turn disturbed by intercultural encounters between researcher and researched – as they are hailed as unwilling diplomatic representatives. On a mundane level, one could talk about this in terms of how, when politics gets serious in Russia, people pay attention, as violent conflict of one sort or another is the usual outcome. In short, people get ‘irritable’ – another term adopted by Navaro-Yashin in relation to phantomic effects. And visible foreignness of a researcher’s personhood adds to that irritability, even if a researcher has achieved partial insider status with some informants, even a surrogate form of ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld 1997) – perhaps due to good language skills.

But to return to Navaro-Yashin’s insight: what is the visible spectre here? The Ukraine conflict as a manipulated media spectre makes it that much worse. All the over-done media propagandising about CIA operatives in the Donbass and crucified Russian children in Eastern Ukraine merely make the psychological states of Russians more and more ‘disturbed’ yet impossible to express adequately or in their own way – and increasingly so as longstanding intercultural relations between Ukrainians and Russians are broken by the conflict. Outrage and tragedy is being daily performed on people’s behalf by the state media, depriving them of the right to develop their own feelings of trauma and loss. There is both an immediacy and pain – increasingly the conflict becomes real as relatives or friends in Ukraine or Crimea, or families with serving military personnel are affected. At the same time the conflict is ‘absent’ – in that no public sign of it is allowed to escape the carefully orchestrated depiction in the media. Meanwhile people carry on mostly in silence in the sunny and quiet lives of a Russian summer. Navaro-Yashin makes use of the concept of simulacrum; nothing fits this better than the Ukraine conflict as experienced by people in Russia.

The last remnants of the independent Russian media talk of the social catastrophe the conflict in Ukraine has accelerated in Russia: the ‘loss of public understanding of the reality of its own existence, economically, socially, culturally and politically; this far reaching process has been the cause of the moral degradation of society’ (Kobrin 2015). However, the silence and civility I mainly encounter refutes this patronising and stereotyping statement of Russians’ supposed complicity in their own brainwashing. The pregnant silences and civility of the field continue to reflect the inadequacy of words and talk in expressing the different types of fear, shame, anxiety and trauma of people. Rather than distance them, the general unwillingness of people to move beyond silence, can be seen to draw people together at least in acknowledgement of the way their worlds had been jolted out of position. Sometimes civility and intimate silences break down as forms of indirect communication. More often than not this is when some kinds of intellectualising is attempted. Only rarely are the silences ambiguous or hostile.

I don’t want to over-emphasise the ‘jarring’ effect of the researcher in the field. Yet, the kind of silences encountered, punctuated by matter-of-fact references to nuclear war, collective punishment etc., suggest a broader projection of the real catastrophe of Russian people’s own trauma, the trauma of the late Soviet and post socialist epoch: state violence as a substitute for politics; abrupt social change, impoverishment and upheaval; the division of common spaces by ethno-nationalism; the ultimate threat of the other (symbolised by nuclear conflict).

However, this paper shows how external political events can both distance and draw the researcher closer to informants in unpredictable ways and how the affective response is important (whether that of the visibly angry and upset – or the physic effort of front-work that then is expressed in other, indirect ways). Neutrality can work for short term encounters (but showing feelings helped, even with those who disagreed). The ‘diplomatic’ metaphors of field research is difficult to stretch as far as has been tried to in the past (‘ask provocative questions’, ‘assume an air of ignorance’, ‘maintain a front’). Especially in the era of hyper connectivity, instant news and global travel, there are increasingly few naïve informants to mislead with feigned neutrality. We are, as researchers, inevitably representatives of the conception of our culture’s soft power, however critical we might want to be of that term. There are no prescriptions for dealing with the geopolitical baggage of our origin cultures, except for continuing to both speak softly but sometimes let our dramaturgical front break down, as well as to respect the meaningful and affectual silences of the people in the field we encounter as they express so much through them.

**Conclusions**

Classic ethnographic rapport building deserves further examination in the light of the porosity of politics, the social environment and the field. Neutrality seems impossible as politics infects nearly all field relations. When thinking about the so-called ‘shaping’ of public opinion by media, as much as our own claim to maintaining diplomatic neutrality in field relations, perhaps Orwell’s famous line on nationalist propaganda is worth repeating: ‘One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool’ (Orwell 1945). Interestingly Orwell here develops his idea of the (partly class-based) distinction between patriotism as *feelings* of shared culture, and nationalism as rationalizing of difference. In a sense he anticipates Herzfeld’s idea of cultural intimacy at the nexus of shared comfort-inadequacy, but brackets it off as ‘patriotism’ – a ‘social poetics’ of hope, in contrast to nationalism – a social poetics of exclusion. Similarly, patriotism is linked with affective and shared states, nationalism with calculated advantage and relative prestige (Lutman 1967) – distinctive positions that can been seen replicated in some of my field encounters. While Sasha the forklift driver baits me, his instincts are those of the ‘victim’ positioning: performing the defensively (inadequate-comfortable) patriotic person. Similarly, the paratroopers’ talk was not directed at asserting nationalistic superiority over me, or claims to Ukrainian inferiority. Contrast this to the most unpleasant and barbed nationalistic sentiment expressed by any of my informants: a professor who calmly states that Ukrainians are undeserving of statehood.

Herzfeld likens the dynamism of social poetics that contribute to cultural intimacy as akin to the performance of the ethnographer in the field (1997: 23). In considering the meaning of ‘everyday diplomacy’ at the intimacy-geopolitical nexus, it is worth bearing in mind Herzfeld’s contention that performative cultural intimacy is always both socially embedded and potentially ‘deforming’: departing from the ‘script’ of self-presentation in interpersonal relations. In addition, politicised agency at some level is mediated by affect – it necessarily is ‘jarring’, as Navaro-Yashin shows. State identity and international relations are increasingly interrogated through the lens of personhood. This can be seen in work that links Herzfeld’s cultural intimacy of citizens, to behaviour and ‘responses’ of the state itself to external criticism - and an acknowledgement of ‘affect’ and the ‘emotions of shame, guilt or embarrassment’ (Subotic and Zarabol 2013). Anthropologists can therefore make a worthwhile contribution to the study of intimacy-geopolitics, and the cultural turn in international studies, by bringing to the table their awareness of the embedded nature of personhood. After all, post-realist, post-structuralist notions of the relationship of state to ‘international community’ are akin to anthropological notions of individual to person. The latter originates in a community- and socially-oriented self which acknowledges individual agency, but constrains it and subordinates it to collectively-held and negotiated normative values.

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1. For many Russian people ‘English’ and ‘British’ are interchangeable adjectives and ‘nationalities’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Compare Mah’s reflection on ethical issues related to outsider status in three deindustrializing contexts of her research (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A particularly widespread belief is that the Western allies were secretly and actively negotiating a separate general peace with Nazi Germany and engaged in imperialist intrigue. This derives from the very popular fictional book and screen versions of the works by 1970s espionage writer Yulian Semyonov which depict Operation Sunrise in March 1945 (the surrender of German forces in Italy). It is obvious how current interpretations of xenophobia and Russia responses to the current crises must be understood in terms of the long term exposure of individuals to ideological materials embedded in all kinds of cultural contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)