



What are the Boundaries of Public Engagement in a More Connected World?

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SLAVIC STUDIES

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EASTERN EUROPEAN
LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

The proposed paper discusses how the relationships between the researchers and the ‘field’ in social sciences have been transformed during the last decades. It explores the concept of the ‘public engagement’, its ethical and conceptual boundaries, and the criteria of its ‘successfulness’ – in relation to the academic research, researchers, and the local communities where the research is conducted.

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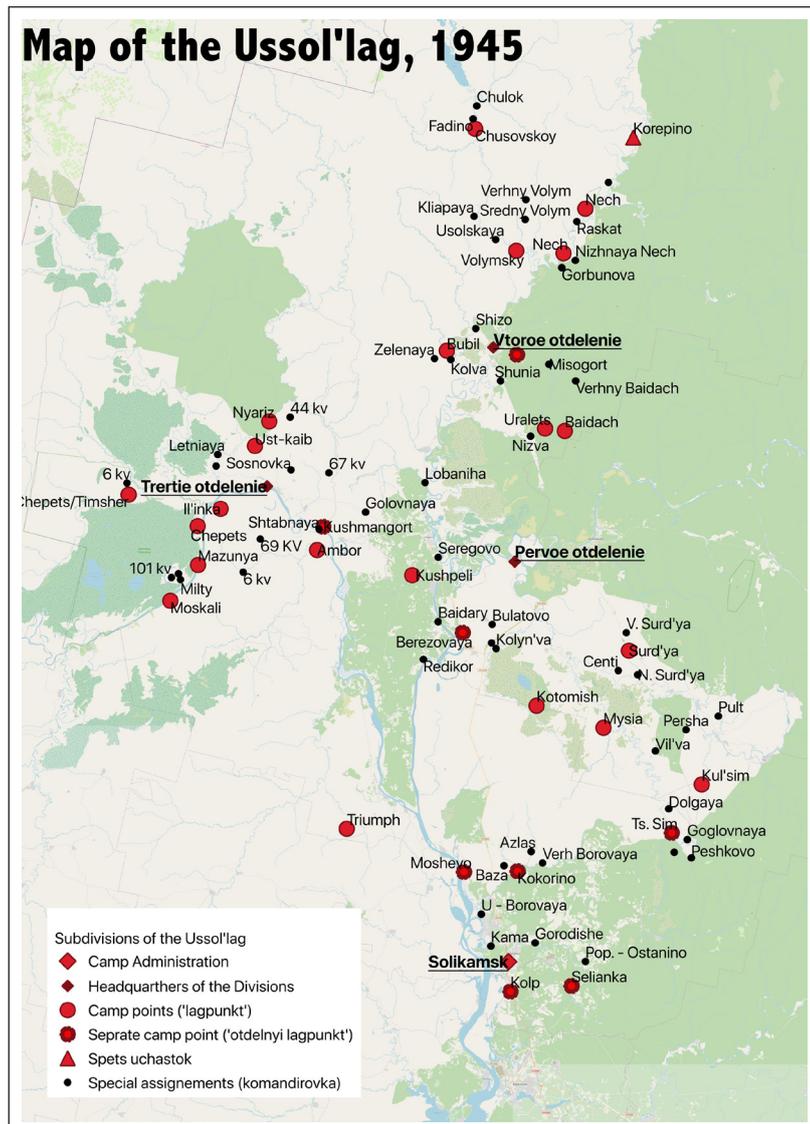
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“What?” is a question that might be read and answered in various ways in the context of academic “public engagement”. What are we trying to achieve by engaging with a particular community? What are the methods of this engagement? What are we expecting as a result and what is the level of our control over the engagement project’s legacy? Who determines what is produced? How do we package our findings? What responsibilities do we have towards the people we engage?

In the context of UK academia, the reach and significance of our work’s impact is determined by evidence of the changes it brings about. This is what funding bodies expect to learn from our research proposals and it is one of the essential criteria for measuring their success. When squeezed to conform to funding guidelines, the outcomes of public engagement work can sometimes narrow down to secure clichés: “broadening understanding”, “stimulating creativity”, “challenging preconceptions”, “providing new perspectives.” However, in many cases the influence of research on communities or policy-makers is far more complex than these labels suggest and cannot be measured in terms of easily evidenced benefits. Let us be honest: most Slavic Studies scholars do not build roads in settlements in the Global South, nor are we developing new vaccines or medicine. We do something else and our impact is harder to define. Public engagement work in the humanities and social sciences might not be able to present physical changes within a community; we talk instead about more abstract notions—shifts in values, understanding, attitudes—and quite often our control over a project’s impact is limited.

I myself work in places that appeared as a result of Soviet repressions and within the communities that were created by them. With my [Gulag Maps project](#), I develop a spatial understanding of the Stalinist Terror and a language to name these often still nameless locations. I try to challenge the normalization of these places by reinforcing the connection between people’s spatial identity and the repressions. But that is often precisely what people are trying to escape from—they exclude these events from the history of their families, from their identity, in order to leave

The system of the Ussol’lag camp, 1945. Copyright: ‘Gulagmaps’ project (gulagmaps.org).



those events in the past. They exclude the repressions not only from their own stories, however, but from local history and in so doing sever the connections between features of the built and natural environment from their origin connected with the exiled and repressed citizens. For example, you are unlikely to encounter anyone happy to trace the history of their village to forced resettlement, or to connect the history of the factory they worked in with the forced labour of gulag inmates. In this way, the repressions come to be erased from people's identities and their relationship to the spaces they inhabit, at both local and regional levels.

The idea of a researcher who comes to a community to "change the way people think" raises some serious ethical questions. How can we manage our liberal will to make progressive changes while recognizing the rights of a community to reject our proposals and perspectives? How can we ensure that the changes or new gaze that we are proposing are desired, appropriate, and create no harm? In the field of contested memories, traumatic pasts, and local histories to which I belong, we often think we know better than locals what they should be commemorating or contesting, but is it really our responsibility to "shift their understanding" and influence their identities, spatial or otherwise? What are the power relations underpinning such projects? There are always ideologies behind naïve good intentions, even in such delicate forms of public engagement as creating a "safe environment" for dialogue between conflicting parties or, as in my case, in proposing an alternative spatial history of a village.

In liberal Western society, a researcher has the power to name things, to define new subject areas ("Soviet Studies", "The Global East", "Donbas Studies", and so on), to provide definitions and boundaries, and to identify new directions for academic and creative attention. But the researcher's control over the result is limited and we are unable to trace all the outcomes and impacts of our research. We do not write the headlines and we cannot influence the way our findings will be read and interpreted by the people we initially engaged with, or reproduced in media, or implemented by policy-makers. Interpretations and misinterpretations of our research can cause harm and sometimes even have negative consequences for the communities in question. The people I work with can be seriously moved, or even upset, when I ask why there is no memorialization of the Stalinist repressions in their village; the reactions are even stronger when I discuss the fact that their homes appeared because there was a camp there first. They want a life in a "normal" place. Should I continue my work if I know that the local community does not feel that it is needed? These problems are even more acute when research projects are conducted in conflict areas or war zones and attract significant media coverage. The more abstract and delicate our impact plans, the more difficult it is to follow their traces and therefore to predict their outcomes in research proposals.

Research projects conducted in heavily politicized environments present further uncertainty. How do you engage people who endorse views that you oppose? How should I respond to the Stalinists I meet among the descendants of the victims of repressions or when encountering active Vladimir Putin supporters? How does one maintain professional relationships with these people and what are our ethical responsibilities to them? Do we bear the same responsibilities to different groups with whom we engage (e.g. socially deprived communities vs. oligarch politicians)? When "engaging" with people for research, not just to "observe" or "collect data", one starts to develop relationships with them, which tend not to be talked about. Ethical questions about impact can seem abstract until the moment people start calling you on your birthday, or want to stay connected on Facebook, or ask you for help.

A "classical" Western ethnographer, anthropologist, or geographer until the mid-twentieth century lived in two parallel worlds—"the field" and "academia", worlds that would have been much further apart from each other than they are today. But now, in part because of technological developments like social media and smartphones, the rules governing our work in the social sciences and humanities have also changed, as have the relationships with the people we work with "in the field". This has in turn blurred the boundary between "the field" and the everyday life of the researcher. The research object has moved closer to us and to our everyday lives, and we have developed different relationships with the people we study. Today we do research differently, and with that comes more responsibilities: we have to be responsible for delivering quality research outputs beyond academia, promoting public engagement, and we must be sure that this work is desired and will do no harm. What is more, we have to be able to defend our findings and the boundaries of our expertise, to be honest and to maintain healthy relations with the people we engage.

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4

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