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Methodology, ethics and safety in projects documenting the war and refugee experience after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24/02/2022 (translation)

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Russia's invasion of independent Ukraine, Russian crimes committed in the occupied territories and an exodus of millions of Ukrainians from their country are unprecedented events in the post-war history of Europe. The natural reaction of researchers, NGO workers and cultural institutions is a desire not only to provide aid directly, but also to document the experience of war and exile. Research and documentation initiatives emerged almost immediately after the outbreak of the war and gained momentum when Russian crimes were revealed in Mariupol, Bucha and other towns outside Kyiv.

The role of such efforts is extremely important, they meet the criteria of higher-risk research according to the European Commission's guidelines (Ethics in Social Science and Humanities 2018, 7.4.), and the respondents clearly fall into the category of "vulnerable" populations. Hence, special attention needs to be paid to the issues of methodology, ethics and safety – of interviewees, researchers and the data collected – during documentation work.

In this document, we propose general guidelines to address these issues. The proposed standards have been developed for the project "24/02/2022, 5am: Testimonies From the War," which has been running since mid-March, and are the result of collective reflection by the members of the international project team, our first experiences and the application of suggestions from two independent committees reviewing the project: the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Ethical Board at the University of Luxembourg. As they are based on the experience of a large research project, some of these guidelines may be less relevant to small-scale documentation initiatives. However, we hope that they will provide support and reference for all initiatives undertaken in the sphere of documenting events resulting from the war in Ukraine.

[In this document, italics show the specific solutions we used in the project].

The research and documentation project "24/02/2022, 5am: Testimonies From the War" was initiated by the Lviv-based Centre for Urban History, which began documenting the Ukrainian war experience as early as the first days of the war. In Poland, the project focuses on conducting qualitative interviews with Ukrainian refugees and is carried out by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IFiS PAN), in cooperation with the Polish Oral History Association, Mieroszewski Center, the University of St Andrews (Scotland) and the University of Luxembourg. Interviews recorded in Poland will be archived in the Qualitative Data Archive at IFiS PAN.

1. **The project team:**
- we do not recommend carrying out documentation projects alone due to the anticipated organisational and emotional burden;
- the people recording the accounts should be experienced in conducting interviews relating to difficult situations – e.g. experiences of grief and loss, trauma or violence, forced migration, and emotional and life crises;
- it is out of the question to involve people without any relevant experience, e.g. students or researchers who have never conducted empirical research related to these or similar topics; a study documenting the fate of refugees cannot be an educational activity or a teaching component;
- fluency in at least one of the languages spoken by most Ukrainian refugees, i.e. Ukrainian and/or Russian, is necessary;
- if possible, it is advisable to include Ukrainian researchers in the team, including those who have fled Ukraine as a result of the Russian invasion – as long as the psycho-physical condition of such persons allows.

[In the "Testimonies From the War" project, we decided not to collaborate with people whose knowledge of Ukrainian/Russian was insufficient, even if they had extensive research experience].

2. **Preparation of research tools and training:**
- we recommend that a questionnaire or interview disposition is prepared in advance;

[The questionnaire developed in the "Testimonies From the War" project focuses on the reconstruction of events and changing realities of everyday life, rather than on the recollection of mental states accompanying these events; at the same time, it assumes an appropriate degree of openness of the questions so as to take into account each individual situation and to create an appropriate space for the expression of emerging emotions].

- the basic organising principle for an interview should be to follow the interviewee: it is the interviewee who decides which questions to answer and to what extent;
- we recommend consulting a psychologist and/or psychotherapist on the questionnaire in order to verify that the prepared set of issues does not pose a risk of retraumatisation for the interviewee;
- we recommend preparing separate guidelines for the interviewers on how to deal with emotionally difficult situations for the interviewee and for the researcher;
- the interviewers should receive detailed training on the content of the questionnaire and the principles of conducting interviews, and also have access to

additional methodological material and literature on the subject, enriching his or her previous experience.

3. Selection and recruitment of interviewees:

- we recommend that interviews are delayed by at least one month from the time the interviewee reaches the target country. This will exclude from the sample those who have experienced a traumatic war-related event immediately prior to participation in the study, and will enable us to minimise the risk of involving people who have developed post-traumatic stress disorder;
- interviews should only be conducted with people who have given their informed and unambiguous consent to be interviewed, and have their accounts recorded and archived; it is out of the question to persuade or induce potential interviewees and to collect recordings without their consent and knowledge;
- it is worth considering acquiring interviewees via social media and other information channels that do not involve personal contact with the researcher at the recruitment stage and give the interviewee the opportunity to respond (or not) to the announcement about the project;
- when recruiting interviewees through personal contacts, it is imperative to respect the principle of non-dependence between the researcher and the interviewee (the researcher may not record people who live at their home, their acquaintances, people they employ) in order to minimise pressure to consent to being recorded; it is unacceptable to offer assistance in exchange for recording an interview;
- only people whose basic living and financial needs have been met to the best possible extent in a refugee situation should be recorded, e.g. those who have their own accommodation and a relatively stable source of income, and whose legal situation is settled (in Poland, this may be indicated by receiving a national identification number – PESEL);
- it is unacceptable to conduct interviews at railway stations, shelters and other places of temporary stay;
- interviewees should be of legal age and declare good physical and mental health;
- when discussing the purpose of the project and the rules of participation, it should be made clear that participation in an interview does not entail any material benefits, and neither the interviewer nor the institutions implementing the project provide legal or administrative assistance. At the same time, the interviewers, as private persons, may of course provide advice and assistance if they are able and willing to do so. However, this is not the responsibility of the interviewer. We recommend finding out which state institution/aid organisation the interviewee can be referred to in a given city.

[In the "Testimonies From the War" project, we do not pay interviewees to participate in interviews; payment is received by the interviewers as this is their job, and it is particularly important for the household budget in the case of Ukrainian female refugee researchers].

4. The interview situation:

- both the initial contact and the interview itself should take place in the language most convenient for and chosen by the interviewee (this will usually be Ukrainian or Russian);
- the interview will be less stressful for the interviewee if they receive in advance detailed information about the project, as well as a general list of issues and questions to be addressed during the interview (along with the assurance that they do not have to answer all the questions);
- the interviewee should be given a choice of where to conduct the interview; if possible, the researcher should offer the interviewee the option to conduct the interview in a place other than their home (e.g. an office at the project institution or the researcher's own home); it is not advisable to record testimonies in public places (even if relatively quiet and secluded) due to the sensitivity of the data to be collected and possible extreme emotional reactions;

[Our experience in the "Testimonies From the War" project shows that Ukrainian refugees in Poland often share a flat with many other people and conducting an interview there in conditions comfortable for the interviewee is problematic].

- an interview should be preceded by a presentation of the objectives and form of the project and an informal conversation;
- during the initial contact and during the non-questionnaire part of the interview, the researcher should always assess whether the interviewee meets the criteria for participation in the project and whether their current condition allows for recording the interview;
- if the researcher has doubts about the condition of the interviewee, the interview should be postponed until a subsequent meeting or cancelled;
- we recommend audio interviews as a less invasive and stressful form for interviewees; this should always be communicated to them before recording begins;
- in documentation projects on the experience of the ongoing armed conflict, special attention should be paid to information of a sensitive nature that appears in the interview. This includes: sexual violence, human trafficking, war crimes committed by the military on both sides, the situation of family members remaining in occupied territories, and the situation of family members serving in the Ukrainian army or otherwise involved in armed resistance.

[In the "Testimonies of War" project, we recommend following this protocol of conduct: if any of the above occur, refer back to this data (described situations, events, etc.) after the interview ends and make sure that this data should remain part of the interview. The interviewee should be reminded of the possibility of partial or full pseudonymisation of this data. The interviewee can also be reminded that in the case of this data, the interviewee has the right to withdraw consent to use it at any time during the project. Our consent form for the recording includes a field for the interviewee to express their special wishes regarding the use of their personal data and the content of the interview].

- the implementation of projects involving potentially traumatised people should take into account the availability of free psychological assistance for the interviewees in their native language in the event that their emotional state deteriorates as a result of the interview; at a minimum, the interviewee should be provided with information on where such assistance can be obtained. This could be, for example, the telephone number or address of a non-governmental organisation offering such assistance free of charge in Poland;

[In the "Testimonies From the War" project, we decided to cooperate on a permanent basis with a Ukrainian-speaking psychologist, whose contact details are given to the interviewee].

- the researcher should ask the interviewee for permission to be contacted again and, if this is granted, make sure after a few days that the interviewee does not need psychological support; it is also good practice to give the interviewee the contact details of the researcher;
- at each stage of participation in the project, including during and after the interview, the interviewee should have the option to withdraw consent to participate in the project without giving any reason, and with immediate effect. The exact contact details that allow for withdrawal of consent should be included in the forms or information leaflets for those being recorded.

5. Consent to recording and other documents:

- we recommend preparing a written information leaflet about the project, which can be given to the interviewee in advance, together with a general list of the issues to be covered in the interview;
- the leaflet should clearly and accessibly present the purpose of recording interviews and how they will be used afterwards;
- the consent to be recorded should precisely specify the conditions for archiving, using and sharing the recordings;
- the consent-to-be-recorded form should include a field for the researcher's contact details;

– the interviewee should be provided with information on the processing of personal data;

[Projects implemented in the European Union should comply with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) directive. As researchers, we are aware of the fact that statements concerning GDPR are formulated in impersonal language. The information on GDPR developed in the "Testimonies From the War'" project consists of three pages and is kept as short as possible. Our experience shows that it is good practice to tell the interviewee in your own words what the GDPR information is about].

– all documents should be prepared in Ukrainian and Russian.

6. Personal data, its use and security:

– personal data collected in projects documenting the ongoing armed conflict should be treated with special care; we should be aware that adequate security of the collected data and protection against theft or leakage is not only a technical issue, but also an ethical one;
– the interviewee should be offered a choice as to how their personal data and the content of the interview (recording and transcription) will be collected and used. This includes both the issue of anonymity and the purpose for which the data will be used;

[In the "Testimonies From the War" project, the interviewee can choose to have the interview used with their name and surname; with partial pseudonymisation (i.e. with the name and surname replaced by a pseudonym, but without pseudonymisation of other personal data appearing in the interview, e.g. names of towns, streets, names of other people); or with full pseudonymisation (i.e. with all personal data appearing in the interview replaced by pseudonyms). The latter option, full pseudonymisation, means that only the transcript is made available, not the audio file, due to the highly time-consuming and costly process of editing audio files. The interviewee can also choose the purposes for which their recording will be used (e.g. scholarly dissemination and educational purposes, artistic purposes)].

– we recommend well-considered procedures for archiving data and making it available; in the context of the ongoing war, it appears justified to limit access or to postpone this;

[Interviews recorded in the "Testimonies From the War" project will be archived in the Qualitative Data Archive at IFiS PAN, which operates under the highest ethical and personal data security standards and makes its collections available only to registered users (they are not available open access); in the case of our project, it will also be necessary to justify in writing the reason for using the collection].

- we recommend storing interviewees' personal data (name, surname, address, contact telephone number) as well as project data (recording, transcription) in various formats and locations: locally, on external disks or disks of properly secured computers and in remote locations, e.g. on virtual disks; it is unacceptable to provide access to data to unauthorised persons or to keep unsecured files on private computers for longer than necessary;
- before starting work, the interviewer should sign a document agreeing to confidentiality with regard to the data they will be working with;
- once the recording has been handed over to the person in charge of archiving, the interviewer should permanently delete any files from their computer.

[In the "Testimonies From the War" project, a copy of the entire collection will be stored on the servers of the project partner, the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History at the University of Luxembourg].

7. Supervision and safety of researchers:

- it is important to be aware that also those recording the accounts of war refugees from Ukraine are exposed to stress and traumatisation; therefore, they should be provided with methodological and psychological support throughout the project;
- we recommend regular meetings of the team of interviewers where they can share their impressions from conducting interviews, discuss and correct the questionnaire and raise any problems encountered;
- we recommend that such meetings are attended by a psychologist or psychotherapist, or that separate supervision sessions are organised, led by a person with this type of training;
- we recommend that interviewers adjust the number of interviews they record to their individual emotional capacity;

[Our experience in the "Testimonies of War" project shows that interviews on the war and refugee experience are highly emotionally engaging and exhausting].

- we recommend external supervision in the form of consultation with experienced researchers from outside the team on the progress of the project and on emerging difficulties and contentious issues.

[In the "Testimonies From the War" project, we have established two external advisory and supervisory bodies: the Advisory Board, a narrower group of experts with research experience and expertise relevant to the project, and the Academic Council, composed of researchers and personalities with significant expertise and authority, including in the field of research ethics].