"I Don't Know, I Wasn't There": The Possibility of Knowing in a Depoliticized Society

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ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In spite of the pervasive influence of propaganda and conspiracy theories in Russia, qualitative interviews demonstrate Russians' preference for first-hand, factual knowledge. In this article, we draw on the sociology of scientific knowledge to analyze this phenomenon. We conclude that the imperative to "be there" and "see with one's own eyes" is a discursive device that helps people avoid political polarization while reflecting and reinforcing depoliticization.

Since the beginning of Russia's so-called "special military operation" in Ukraine,[1] many commentators have condemned ordinary Russians for being hesitant to adopt a clear-cut oppositional stance and insisting instead that "everything is not so clear" (*ne vse tak odnoznachno*). Besides alleged deficiencies in the Russian moral character, such espousals of uncertainty have been variously attributed to the particular gullibility of the Russian public, its inability to tell the "facts" from propaganda, and the pervasive influence of conspiracy theories (see Filipenko 2023; Yablokov 2023).

Often made in isolation from systematic empirical evidence, such arguments tend to downplay the Russian public's appreciation for raw, unmediated facts. The corpus of interviews with Russians collected by the Public Sociology Lab (PS Lab) features people talking about "being there" and "seeing with one's own eyes" as the crucial requirements for being able to take a stance about political events. This apparent preference for first-hand, empirical knowledge contradicts the conventional narrative of Russians' susceptibility to propaganda. To make sense of this preference, one needs to attend to the context in which it is expressed.

"Being There": The Necessity of First-Hand Knowledge

In February–June and October–December 2022, PS Lab collected 167 in-depth interviews with Russians who either support or do not explicitly oppose the "special military operation." The interviews explored how these individuals perceive and assess the "special military operation," its causes and consequences (PS Lab 2023a; PS Lab 2023b). The comprehensive interview guide covered a range of topics, including preferred information sources and habits of media consumption. In-depth interviews, which give people the opportunity to justify their views at some length, make it possible to go beyond standardized survey responses and study respondents' reasoning.

One of the typical responses, especially frequent in the first wave of our study, was a refusal to take a clear stance on the "special military operation" on the grounds that the respondent lacked the knowledge to form an opinion or pass judgment. By "knowledge," respondents did not mean the reports, photographs and eyewitness testimonies about the hostilities and destruction in Ukraine that circulate in the media and that many people hoped in Spring 2022 would change public opinion in Russia. Indeed, there was no shortage of images of destroyed cities and dead bodies available on independent media in Russia. But to form an opinion, many of the PS Lab study respondents sought a different kind of knowledge:

> **In this situation, I don't have any opinion or judgment because no one will tell me the whole truth, therefore I don't know it.** Relying on some snippets, some telephone conversations, to make a judgment of what's going on there—I think it's not the way to do it. Those things that our media show us—yes, things might not be that way. It could be all staged, for instance, maybe. Or maybe these are real actions but they have been packaged in such a beautiful wrapper that you think: "Damn, that's what it is. I should help people out there somehow." **The very fact of the conflict—yes, it exists. But what is actually going on there? I don't know. I wasn't there.** (male, 35 years old, engineer)

In the above quotation, the respondent does not deny that "the conflict," as they prefer to phrase it, exists. However, not "being there" prevents them from knowing "what is actually going on there" (*cho tam konkretno proishodit*). First-hand knowledge derived from the immediacy of "being there" is needed to make the

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1 This euphemism was used in the interviews for ethical reasons. To stay true to the data, we maintain this usage throughout this paper.

transition from the recognition that "the conflict exists" to forming an opinion or judgment about "what actually is going on." The impossibility of witnessing the acts of war in person prevents that transition; unless one can "be there" to see what is going on with one's own eyes, everything will remain "not so clear."

"I don't know, I wasn't there" is a discursive device that some respondents use to justify and explain their resistance to take a clear stance or make a judgment. More importantly, at the same time as they make a claim that judgment or evaluation should be suspended until the conditions of knowing are met ("being there"), they also make implicit generalizations about the possibility (or impossibility) of achieving certainty in the socio-political environment that they inhabit. For instance, while reflecting on what information can be trusted and how to verify it, one respondent said the following:

> I don't know how to verify information. I really don't. The information is so polarized: here these media say that there was an explosion, but others say there was no explosion. **How would I know? I am not there, am I?** Here there are photos and reports that there is smoke and fire. But then there are others [saying/showing] that there is no fire. And honestly, I don't know. (female, 34 years old, logistics)

Struck by conflicting reports and contradictory visuals, the question "How would I know? I'm not there" testifies to the intricate relationship between opinion/point of view and facts/information. But it is also a commentary on the social conditions of knowing that the respondents are acutely aware of, living in an authoritarian country with a decades-long history of stifling free media and consistently low levels of generalized trust (FOM 2023). Thus, the imperative of "being there" not only points to the assumed condition for knowing, but also conveys an assessment of the social environment in which knowing occurs.

Knowledge and Trust

To get a better sense of this environment, it is worth turning to the sociology of scientific knowledge, a discipline that has been grappling with similar issues for decades. One of its most important insights is the recognition that to understand how knowledge functions in society, one needs to drop the atomistic assumption that the relevant unit of knowledge and action is always an individual. Instead, knowledge should be conceived of as a kind of collective action and a moral project.

A classic example, suggested by the sociologist Barry Barnes, goes as follows. If an individual knows Euclid's theorems from the first to the twentieth, he or she is fully equipped to prove the twenty-first theorem on the basis of this knowledge. A completely different situation

emerges, however, if the knowledge of the twenty theorems is spread between the members of a community, so that individuals know only some of the theorems. Unlike the solitary knower, such a community is not necessarily in a position to prove the twenty-first theorem. Different individuals in possession of different bits of required knowledge may not know each other, or trust each other, or believe that others can be trusted at all. Under such conditions, the twenty-first theorem would remain unproven. As Barnes puts it, in the absence of the necessary social relationships, the mere presence of technical knowledge is not enough for the proof to be executed: "Individuals would have known enough mathematics, but not known enough about themselves" (Barnes 1985, 82). Knowledge by individuals does not necessarily add up to knowledge by a community.

This argument is also applicable to empirical knowledge. In their book about objectivity, historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007) describe scientific activity as "collective empiricism." Scientists gain new knowledge about the physical world empirically, through experience and experimentation; however, this experience is not sought, held, accumulated, or transmitted individually. Even the most elementary high-school science experiment necessarily depends on trusting others' knowledge (e.g., about the functioning of the instruments and components used). As soon as one conceives of science as a project of collective empiricism, where experiential knowledge gained by individuals must be passed on to others, the necessity of trust-based interpersonal relations becomes immediately apparent.

Moreover, while trust can be a neutral descriptive term for an outside observer, from the insider's perspective, trusting others (or withholding one's trust) is always a moral issue. As Steven Shapin puts it in his discussion of trust in science, "To the aggregate of individuals we need to add the morally textured relations between them, notions like authority and trust and the socially situated norms which identify who is to be trusted, and at what price trust is to be withheld" (Shapin 1994, 27). As an institution and a professional culture, science tends to encourage collective scrutiny of new information and controlled skepticism more than is acceptable in everyday social life, where interpersonal trust arguably plays a greater role. Thus, the insights of the sociology of scientific knowledge may provide additional analytical leverage when applied to non-scientific contexts.

Avoiding Politicization

Considered through the lens of the sociology of scientific knowledge, the emphasis on the necessity of "being there" observed in PS Lab interviews becomes even more striking. As a discursive trope, it points to the impossibility of its own premise. Even in everyday life, it is impossible to

rely exclusively on first-hand knowledge acquired by personally witnessing events; otherwise, nobody would be able to make even the simplest judgment. In this sense, "being there" has a utopian quality (something that is not possible even though still talked about), especially under conditions of an armed conflict, where the messiness of the situation on the ground makes the actual epistemic advantages of witnessing highly questionable.

Moreover, despite insisting on the importance of "being there" and "seeing with one's own eyes," the respondents remain unclear about exactly *what* is to be seen "there." Thus, given its essentially "objectless" character, we may interpret the desire to know things firsthand as an expression of extreme distrust. As one respondent put it, answering the question of whether she had seen the pictures of destruction and casualties in Ukraine:

> Yes, I did. But I know what CGI can do and I know how things can be staged, so **my principle in consuming information is that the things that I haven't seen with my own eyes, it's all bullshit, regardless of whose side it is.** I just don't watch these things. I know what's going on, but for me it doesn't make a difference. There is a wonderful movie "Wag the Dog," I recommend that everyone watch this [American] movie instead of the political news now. In that movie, they show how one can draw a picture of war or not draw this picture, if one doesn't need it. That's why I don't follow it [the reports from Ukraine]. (female, 22 years old, student)

As Steven Shapin puts it, the moral order of trust and the cognitive order of knowledge are assembled and broken simultaneously. On the one hand, our knowledge of the external world is mediated by interpersonal trust, which is based on an implicit assumption that others can generally be trusted. On the other hand, the trusting relationships themselves assume the existence of a shared external world, equally available for our own perception and for that of our peers, so that others' reports can in principle be compared to perceptual evidence. Questioning any of these assumptions amounts to an attempt to break down the moral and the cognitive order, and requires "the public withdrawal of trust in another's access to the world and in another's moral commitment to speaking truth about it" (Shapin 1994, 36). Doubting another's ability to report reliably and sincerely about the actual state of affairs entails "withdrawing the possibility of disagreeing with them."

In the present case, this dynamic may function somewhat differently. Given the impossibility of its fulfillment, the imperative of "being there" expressed by respondents may be interpreted as a way of indefinitely postponing the disagreement with others without foreclosing its possibility. Making judgments and engaging in a (potentially polarizing) political argument will become possible once all the facts have been established. This, in turn, makes the possibility of discussion contingent on participants' ability to "be there" and "see with their own eyes." By subscribing to a dysfunctional epistemology of *individual* empiricism, where any and all knowledge comes from one's own experience, respondents avoid explicitly political discussion that might be destructive for their ongoing relationships with others. In this way, the demand for first-hand knowledge not only reflects, but also reinforces pervasive depoliticization (see Erpyleva and Magun 2014).

Conclusion

The statement "I don't know, I wasn't there" operates as a discursive device that respondents use to explain and justify their refusal to take a clear-cut stance or hold an opinion about Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. It allows them to continue to withdraw and not make a judgment while pointing out that the conditions of knowing or forming an opinion are not fulfilled ("being there"), and at the same time make broader comments about the possibility (or impossibility) of knowing in the socio-political environment in which they live.

The demand for first-hand knowledge expressed by some of the PS Lab study respondents can be seen as a reaction to the situation where one is faced with the necessity to explain and defend one's position, or lack thereof, on some contentious issue. As such, it helps resolve the possible moral contradiction and carry on, indefinitely suspending the need to make a judgment or form an opinion, as well as the need to deal with people who may have different views. By saying that he or she "wasn't there," one can look level-headed and even objective, as the refusal to have an opinion is justified by unfulfilled conditions of knowing ("being there") rather than moral or political reasons. In addition, it helps respondents push back against those who would portray them as complicit or undecided; instead, they can aspire to look experienced and unwilling to take things at face value.

As a reflection of depoliticization, as well as one of the conditions for its reproduction, this phenomenon belongs to a broader family of epistemic effects of politicization and depoliticization that deserve further study (see Kropivnitskyi and Denisenko 2022).

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ANALYSIS

Is Civil Society in Russia Really Dead?

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Introduction

On June 23, the NYU Jordan Center for Advanced Study held a discussion about the impact of the war on Russian civil society (United States Institute of Peace 2023). Participants were unanimous in their opinion that the war had finally buried civil society in Russia. This is in line with the general consensus among experts on Russia that civil society is dead.

It is hard not to agree with expert opinions about the institutional weakness of civil society in Russia and its inability to organize a concerted effort to put pressure on the political regime. The repression, which escalated with the start of the war, has quite literally destroyed the most influential and visible independent civil society organizations in the institutional field.

At the same time, if we look at grassroots civil society—the various manifestations of civil activism in Russian regions outside of Moscow and bottom-up social initiatives, often informal networks of people that do not openly oppose the political regime but are still constantly challenging local power structures—a different picture emerges.

In this article, I offer commentary on a few issues and claims made in the course of this debate from the perspective of grassroots civil society. I rely on data from three studies conducted by CISRus. The first is an attempt to map Russian anti-war civil activism, the second focuses on informal volunteer networks to help Ukrainian refugees, and the third analyzes the changes that have taken place in Russian universities since the outbreak of the war.

"The Demise of Civil Society Didn't Start with the War, It Started Long before the War…"

Over the past few decades, independent civil society in Russia has been systematically destroyed by the regime. Since the early 2000s, nonprofit organizations (NPOs)