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A Contemplative Sociologist Looks at War

Abstract: This paper aims to dereify the concept of war by presenting it through the first-person perspective of a direct participant in the war in Ukraine (Artem Chekh) and an external observer, the paper's author. The study will conduct an explicit interpretation of the lived experiences of both participants and observers of the war. These experiences will be explored through the domains of the lived space, lived time, and lived body. The interpretative work will be approached from a contemplative perspective, drawing on phenomenological inspirations. Contemplation will be based on the explicitation of the narrations of the direct participants of the war, utilizing phenomenological understanding and artistic interpretations (poetry and visual art).

Keywords: war, contemplation, contemplative sociology, dereification, pathic dimension

Introduction

In this paper, I focus on the existential experience of war and the Deathworld from the pathic, first-person perspective of a Ukrainian writer and soldier. First, Artem Chekh described the war that began between Ukraine and Russia in 2014, and then in two further texts he spoke of the war that erupted in 2022. My explication will be inspired by contemplative and phenomenological sociology. I want to show the war through lived experience to avoid reifying the concept. I want to understand the war in Ukraine through my role as a symbolic interactionist and contemplative sociologist inspired by phenomenology and contemplative studies. I concentrate on the experience of the body, space, and time in the context of being in the Deathworld (see [Bentz et al. 2018](#)).

Moreover, I present the view of the Other's perception of the war in the context of my self-definition (the looking-glass self) as a supporter of the Ukrainian nation. It will be a first-person perspective on my emotions and views of the war and on communicating with opponents regarding my perceptions of the war. I also present poetry, photos, and collages to enhance understanding of the war.

When examining the existential aspects of war, my approach will be contemplative, drawing inspiration from the framework proposed by Bentz and Giorgino (2016). I define contemplation as follows: "Contemplation is a kind of activity that leads to a certain state of mind, and at the same time, it is a method of obtaining knowledge about some objects at present, and also about getting knowledge itself, here and now, by mindful insight into the perceived (and also imagined) phenomena or objects, and also into the self" ([Konecki 2018: 22](#)). I contemplate lived experience as it appears during the war in the soldier's mind

and heart, based on the first-person perspective of Artem Chekh (2020, 2022, 2023), who describes everyday life in a war zone and in the Deathworld. He does not focus solely on combat; he recounts the daily routine of the Lifeworld and numerous incidents involving military bureaucracy, soldiers' conversations, food, sleep, and leave, among other things. I see what kind of lived experience shapes the context of enduring the war (Dutta 2021). I also add material interpreting journalists' accounts of the Russian-Ukrainian war and testimonies of Ukrainian psychotherapists.

My exploration will also be guided by the Deathworld concept developed by Valerie Bentz (Bentz et al. 2018; Bentz and Marlatt 2021). The Deathworld is intricately linked to the colonization of the Lifeworld by technocratic systems and technology. In this context, fragmented consciousness fails to comprehend the underlying causes of the proliferation of the Deathworld. This phenomenon is also intertwined with the absence of free choice and the erosion of "we-relationships," giving rise to systems of oppression and domination within this space (Bentz and Marlatt 2021).

In this death space, the destruction of the Lifeworld is evident; where individuals lack freedom, a stable environment is absent (typifications and systems of relevancies are difficult to recreate and apply), life projects are shattered, and we-relations disintegrate (Konecki 2022: 77). Ontological security disappears, while the meaning of space can change (Konecki 2018: 99–102). The space may be either dangerous or safe: "The skies are not safe at home. The skies are used for murder. Enemy military planes, fighter jets, and many missiles are flying in the sky above our country. Then, the sirens start" (Kovalova's narrative in Sneed et al. 2023: 348).

The time horizon changes. The prevalence of "wrong speech" further contributes to the suffering in this field of death. The language is dichotomous and divisive, failing to reflect the unity between humans and nature (Konecki 2022: 78–79). The community excludes strangers, and the use of incorrect language, especially when labeling certain individuals as "strangers," associates them with notions of infection, fatal illness, the spread of diseases, religious enemies, and monsters bringing violence. "Wrong speech can be hidden behind lofty, patriotic, and/or religious slogans, but the specific emotional energy still accompanies them" (Konecki 2022: 87).

In my contemplation of language, I direct my focus toward emotions, bodily sensations, and the embodiment of users' perspectives (see Konecki 2018). I too think, as Narozhna (2022) emphasized, that the impact of war is frequently *disembodied*, not only within scholarly discourse but also in our everyday perception, especially when people are distanced from the deadly realities of a war zone.

Specifically, my contemplative perspective and attention is centered on the viewpoint of an active participant in the war, as elucidated in the first-person narrative of Chekh's book (2020). Chekh was a soldier in the Ukrainian army fighting the Russians. The narrative revolves around the embodied experience of the war (Merleau-Ponty 2005). I analyze the story to dereify war as a concept that is connected with rationalist and materialist perspectives of military strategic studies and discursive and disembodied critical war studies (Narozhna 2022). The military's strategic approach to space is pragmatic and rationalistic; location and territory are fundamental in planning a strategy for fighting (Carter 2010). "Critical war studies" concentrate on the discourse of war as the generative

power that shapes the mode of knowing and power relations in society (Barkawi, Brighton 2011).

Both approaches ignore the body and feelings and how the war is experienced situationally by the direct participants living in the Deathworld. I want to add some materials and reflections on this issue from the first-person perspective of direct participants of the war. The concept of the Deathworld is important in my explorations. Furthermore, I explore my own environment and emotions in an attempt to understand an author directly involved in the war and to offer my perspective as an outsider. The above-mentioned authors did not use a first-person approach to analyze war. When I focus on the existential experience of war and the Deathworld in the paper, I look at the pathic dimension of Artem Chekh's writing. My explication is also inspired by existential sociology (Douglas and Johnson 1977; Johnson and Kotarba 2002) and phenomenological sociology (Schütz 1944, 1962). Existential sociology focuses on the emotional dimension of lived experience, which is embodied and situated within a concrete context. The subject feels, suffers, responds to the suffering of others, and decides whether or not to care for them (Douglas and Johnson 1977). Phenomenological sociology introduces the concept of the lifeworld, where we often make use of the typification of others to see them not as unique individuals but as social types. This framework also involves a system of relevance or values to justify our choices, which may not necessarily be empathetic to others (Schütz 1944, 1962).

This pathic dimension helps us dereify war, which is often considered an abstract term, without the deep and personal meaning of the people experiencing it. Dereification involves refraining from conceptualizing human activities as reflections of natural forces, universal dispositions, or expressions of divine will (Moore 1995: 701). This dereifying perspective can be attained by focusing on the concept of "emptiness," engaging in the application of a "non-conceptual mind," or practicing "no-mind" (Moore 1995: 699). In this way, I get to the pathic dimension of the experience (emotional, embodied, and situational in the broad sense). As an individual, I perceive illusions that may be traps for my mind. I do not see and feel the experience and suffering of the Other or my role in this perception: "Anything perceived as existing independently of the perceiver can be dereified by recalling the subjective experiences out of which the object was constituted and by apprehending the reflexive connections of the object to its extent" (Moore 1995: 703, as cited in Konecki 2018: 40).¹

I do not refuse other explanations of the war; I can find and see the global, economic, political, ideological, religious, and discursive circumstances of the war and its causes (Leder 2023: 297–298; Ehrenreich 2011). However, I want to look at it mainly from the perspectives of a direct participant (Artem Chekh) and an external observer (the author of this paper), who collaborate on a final reading of Chekh's text without seeing and

¹ I also wrote a text on empathy in the context of the war in Ukraine (Konecki 2022). I conducted research with students, who engaged in self-observation and self-reporting of their lived experience while viewing photographs of victims and refugees from Ukraine. The aim was to dereify the concept of war and empathy. I conclude that empathy naturally arises as an initial response to our existential circumstances, triggered when the ego is momentarily set aside to comprehend the Other. However, the motivation to nurture and sustain empathy in order to aid others can be learned and is shaped by social influences. I hope that my approach to the Ukrainian war will counteract the kind of attitude in which the suffering of others who are not connected with us interests us only in so far as we feel lucky not to be there. Photos of war may provoke passive sympathy (Sontag 1978, 2004).

knowing each other. Nevertheless, the broader context, which includes political, economic, and symbolic dimensions, holds equal significance. As Patočka (1996: 120) noted, these explanations have “all approached war from the perspective of peace, day, and life, excluding its dark nocturnal side.” However, it is imperative to recognize that war also plays a pivotal role in shaping our daily interactions, emotions, energy, spirit, and character. War often starts in a time of peace. It begins in our heads and hearts, not only in politics and the economy. I learned at school about the atrocities and heroism of war, about just and unjust wars. These wars are with me in peacetime. I feel them; the pathic dimension of past battles is overwhelming and even embodied (see also Dutta 2021). I have often been the recipient of narratives passed directly from participants in a war.

I understand the term “pathic” after Max Van Manen (2016: 267):

Knowledge is *pathic* to the extent that the act of practice depends on the sense and sensuality of the body: personal presence, relational perceptiveness, tact for knowing what to say and do in contingent situations, thoughtful routines and practices, and other aspects of knowledge that are in part pre-reflective, and yet thoughtful—full of thought (see also Merleau-Ponty 2005).

But it could also be argued that such pathic knowledge not only inheres in the body but also in the things of my world, in the situation(s) in which I find myself, and in the very relations that I maintain with others and the things around us. For example, pathic “knowledge” also expresses itself in the confidence with which I do things, the way that I “feel” the atmosphere of a place, the manner in which I can “read” someone’s face, and so forth. Knowledge inheres in the world already in such a way that it enables my embodied practices. Past experience shapes the everyday life’s bodily perception, here and now:

An encounter with a world-shattering event, like a sudden attack by established acquaintances, strips away the protective casing that comes with our body being at ease with the familiar world around us. The body then begins to relate to everyday objects through the tragic incident (Dutta 2021: 214).

Sensory knowledge also encompasses the perception of space. I can understand it rationally through categories and types (knowing maps, creating them, setting boundaries, giving names to areas),² but also intimately. In that case, space becomes a place for us to pause and momentarily feel safe. The same person can know a place both intimately and conceptually; he/she can articulate concepts but, at the same time, struggle to express what is known through the senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and even sight (Yi-Fu Tuan 1987: 17).

It is also important to remember that the pathic dimension fluctuates just as a mood does; for example, it changes in the same way that the mood I have in a building (e.g., a church) changes when I enter it at different times of the day or year. I will be in a different mood in a place such as my home depending on whether I am listening to bomb explosions or pleasant music from a neighbor’s window.

² The meaning of physical space also changes on the front line: “Thus, as an important contemporary psychologist describes it, in the experience of a front-line artillery gunner, the topographic character of the landscape changes, so that abruptly there is an end to it, and the ruins no longer are what they had been—villages and so on—but they have become what they could be at the given moment—shelters and reference points. Thus, the landscape of life’s fundamental meanings was transformed, it acquired an end beyond which there could be nothing further, higher, more desirable” (Patočka 1996: 131).

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My analysis is rooted in the book *Absolute Zero* (Chekh 2020). This work provides a detailed account of the daily experiences of soldiers on the front line during the onset of the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2014. The narrative is crafted through the narrator-soldier's everyday observations of life at the front and his writings during his free time. It resembles a memoir, unfolding as a continuous record akin to a diary but enriched with mindful, reflective insights into the conditions of war. I also use Chekh's first-person narratives published in the *New York Times* during the second phase of the war, which started in 2022 (Chekh 2022, 2023). Analyzing personal documents is especially useful for studying a subject's pathic dimensions and lived experience. Some documents (e.g., diaries, memoirs, letters, and even literary books and poetry) can be treated as empirical materials, where I find expressions of emotions, bodily sensations, and thoughtful interpretations of the Lifeworld (Konecki 2022a, see chapter 4).

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote a similar narrative during the First World War—a diary with his philosophical contemplations on one side and depiction of a soldier's daily life on the other (Wittgenstein 2022; also referenced in Konecki 2023). Despite the differing political and technological contexts and historical timelines, striking similarities emerge in the lived experience of war: courage, uncertainties, bodily sensations, the fear of death, the defiance of that fear, and the inherent drive to describe, conceptualize, and document ideas. Wittgenstein (2022: 139) candidly acknowledged grappling with depression. Additionally, he frequently referenced his relationships with close friends and family. As a volunteer and an educated individual, he encountered challenges in communicating with his fellow soldiers. Despite these difficulties, he endeavored to maintain coherence in his personality through activities such as reading books, keeping a diary, and engaging in philosophical reflections. Notably, these reflections culminated in one of his significant post-war works, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

War, which permeates the Deathworld, establishes a consistent existential context for human beings, transcending temporal and contextual differences. I aim to approach Chekh's text on war with a contemplative mindset, seeking to sense the pathic mood within it and to describe and explicate it in alignment with the writer's perspective.

A Contemplative Explication of a Witness from a Neighboring Country

The war (2022) initially caused—if not panic—increased fear in Poland, and I felt it. The refugees coming to Poland contributed to this fear. Social media, the mass media, and refugees transmitted information about the atrocities the Russians had committed, and also fear and anxiety, sadness, and everyday mourning. How do you respond to this situation? Only by empathizing and helping, collecting donations, and often by accepting refugees into our homes. A majority of Polish people made such choices (Scovil 2023).

A group of scholars, composed of one Ukrainian and six Poles, including myself, provided evidence of these activities in an autoethnographic-collaborative text based on meetings and discussions among us (see Dobosz et al. 2023, as well as the video

The Reverberations of War, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtGef9cxopA>). In that collaborative, autoethnographic paper, anger and the pervasive fear of war took center stage. I grappled with the constant dread of a potential Russian attack on Poland—a fear that weighed heavily on us. Simultaneously, we found ourselves profoundly empathizing with Ukrainian citizens and refugees, who were enduring the harsh realities of the conflict. The emotions of fear, anxiety, and worries about an uncertain future were vividly manifested in the dreams the Polish scholars recounted.

In the face of the aggressor's atrocities and cruelty, we sought solace and understanding through writing. Our reflections took various forms, from memoirs and diaries to contemplative memos; some even evolved into poetry and philosophical musings. Throughout all these texts, there was a pervasive pathic mood, one that allowed us to share in the collective experience.

Andrii Melnikov, a direct participant and victim of the war who was in Ukraine during that tumultuous period, wrote the primary narrative thread of the paper. We endeavored to comprehend his lived experience and to integrate it with our own. Some of us opened our homes to Ukrainian families, providing them with shelter and support. As a group of seven scholars, we each contributed in different ways to assisting Ukrainian refugees and citizens still in Ukraine. Our engagement was active and heartfelt. I also recall the invaluable assistance we received from our American friends, expertly coordinated by Professor Joseph Kotarba from Texas State University—San Marcos.

Making a summary of the text (Dobosz et al. 2023) is a demanding task, as it is an emotional, contemplative, and deeply personal piece of work written in a pathic and vocative style that mirrors our collective thought process. I urge you to read the paper, which has been published, and to watch the performance film that delves deeper into the core of the text. (Dobosz et al. 2023; see also the video, *Reverberations of War* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtGef9cxopA>)).³ Below is a continuation of how I dealt with war in a neighboring country.

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After some time, you get used to war in a neighboring country. It does not touch you directly. We do not see now the death, the killing, the kidnapping of children, and the destroyed houses. We do not have Russians controlling our streets (yet). And we don't see the Russians attacking our family members. Thus, we can go about our business and relax. As time goes by, we read less and less about the war, have no contact with refugees, and do not hear about these horrors; after all, we have no chance to influence events. Great-power politics is going on somewhere, and we are just little pawns in the games of the superpowers. Why bother?

On the other hand, when I watch my colleagues isolate themselves from information and look after themselves, I feel guilty: a war is going on! Every time I look at them, I imagine that at any moment, a plane could fly over and bomb my city. We could be killed. This is

³ My strategy for coping with the war and the associated emotions was writing. I also authored a text on empathy in the context of the war in Ukraine (Konecki 2022).

what I think when I think of Ukrainians in all the cities on the other side of the border. They live in permanent fear and danger. And here we are going to schools and restaurants, going on vacation, and enjoying life (see also Dobosz et al. 2023: 8). My existential situation is entirely different from that of soldiers on the front line and citizens in Ukrainian cities. I feel bad and guilty.

Ukrainian soldiers live in a completely different existential situation. Being on the front line for many months or years, they could be angry, feel rage, their bodies could be injured, they might doubt what they are doing there, and ask many existential questions.⁴

* * *

How do I see it? Below will be my personal, though external, interpretation and explication of a description of war by a Ukrainian participant, Artem Chekh (2022), a soldier and writer. His book *Absolute Zero* is about the war in 2014, based on his diary, and contains two articles concerning the second phase of the war, which started in 2022. Actually, the war we see in Ukraine started in 2014, although many Western observers forget the fact.

Chekh was an active participant in the war, and he described the daily life and lived experience of a soldier—his everyday activities and thoughts, doubts, and emotions while on the front line; his thinking about death and the suddenness of death was an everyday reality. He often thought about death, fear of death, isolation, hopelessness, and apathy.

I think about my probable life and my probable death. Will it be sudden? Will it be here, in this damp bunker? Or maybe I'll live for many more years and die somewhere in a pastoral landscape raising sheep and cattle? And the whole village will come to the funeral of the old man who rejected city life and moved close to the knotweed and duckweed...Am I sleeping? Or maybe I'm just in a stupor. Absence and weightlessness. (Chekh 2020, chapter *Absolute Zero*, paragraphs 6–8)

This is the soldier's state of mind and heart during the war. Being constantly on the alert because of the danger of being killed also forms part of the battle experience on the front line. This leads to permanent fatigue, indifference, and bodily diseases, as well as chaos and disorganization in the cognitive perspective and values. Trauma appears. The death of others becomes a matter of indifference. It is difficult to enjoy everyday things; there is a longing for routine, but it is also difficult to accept it when it occurs. Meeting a loved one becomes difficult, and thoughts revolve around battle sites and colleagues on the front lines.

Staying longer in the zone, where the proximity of the enemy is even palpable, leads to a reevaluation of one's entire life. The emerging numbness and routine can lead to deeper reflection on one's past. *Absolute zero* is a turning point where one redefines one's biography, values, and identities. It is the point of liberation from unnecessary, redundant things in the face of the struggle for life and the experience of the threat of death. It is, as it were, a wartime *epoché*, which cleanses our minds of socially imposed assumptions about life and death.

⁴ Many soldiers do not want to fight and kill the enemy; many studies have demonstrated this fact (Grossman 1996).

It is probably the best time to evaluate how you've lived your life so far. It's also that the possibility that death—your death—will occur rids you of all the baggage of the accepted norms you've so far stupidly ignored. I myself created this comfortable ignorance about everything I believe. This is what absolute zero really is. The boundary across from which lies madness and delusion. Beyond it there's only the end of thoughts, feelings, wishes. It's full immersion in yourself, freedom from wants and worldly needs. This is a total transformation into a different person, one I would've never been capable of becoming under any other circumstances (Chekh 2020; *Absolute Zero*, paragraph 2).⁵

Below, I present quotes from the book and explicate them from my point of view as an outsider. I also consider Chekh's reflections and the experiences he described in two articles published in *The New York Times*. Soldiers frequently question the purpose of the war, harboring fears that its conclusion is elusive, and the perception of time undergoes a shift. If somebody spends five days in a trench waiting for death, the time perspective is completely disturbed; only the present is important—the time associated with the will to survive:

That's what happened, and I accept it. But did I really want to fight? Do hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians really want to risk their lives, to be separated from their families in flooded trenches or dry steppes? Did I really want to die at the end of the world, from which not everyone returns? Probably every Ukrainian soldier asks these questions that don't have answers. In Bakhmut, where I served in May, they were inescapable. The unit I commanded was given the task of building a combat position on the outskirts of the city, but everything was changing very quickly. The Russians captured the rest of the city and most of the Ukrainian units left. Suddenly we found ourselves in a trap—there was no one to cover us. Seeking protection, I lay down in a tiny trench. I spent five days in that tomb waiting for death, sometimes urinating in a plastic bottle and, for fun, counting the calories I consumed and the amount of water I drank (Day 1: 560 calories, 350 milliliters of water. Day 2: 780 calories, 550 milliliters of water. And so on.). For 115 hours, I lay in this four-foot-deep hole and looked up at the clear sky, wincing at the explosions next to me. All around was pure hell (Artem Chekh 2023).

The question of defending the country and participating in battles is existential. Being in the field and fighting does not mean that a person is fully embedded in this position. There are still questions. But at the same time the threat and fear are there, and the battle is going on around one. This is an existential situation, with a Deathworld, but still with questions behind it that unfortunately do not have any answer.⁶

In the quote above, there is a defense of the body and fear expressed by flinching, which is maybe not fully conscious; only the body feels it (see Meacham 2007). And the space of

⁵ Patočka (1996: 125) underscores the transformative nature of war, drawing upon the reflections of Ernst Junger and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "Both Junger and Teilhard emphasize the upheaval by the front line, which is not an immediate trauma but a fundamental transformation of human existence: war in the form of the front line marks humans forever." A human being on the frontline can feel a specific sense of freedom: "The front-line experience, however, is an absolute one. Here, as Teilhard shows, the participants are assaulted by an absolute freedom, freedom from all the interests of peace, of life, of the day" (Patočka 1996: 129–130). One can then forget about the ideological, cultural or national motives for war. Similar feelings are shared by war victims who are not soldiers; below is a statement by Ukrainian psychologist Marta Kovalova: "War became such a painful way of cleansing [ourselves] from false values. Understanding that you will not take anything with you into eternity changes the angle of vision. What was in the shadows becomes visible. It becomes the center of everything. You can see the essence of human existence and the value of meaningful life with much greater clarity" (Kovalova's narrative in Sneed et al. 2023: 351).

⁶ A Ukrainian journalist writes about survival and about a future horizon (see also Dutta 2021: 208–209), which is almost broken in the context of survival. The future is almost not important because it was already broken in the past: "The old life is slowly drifting away. The man at the front thinks about survival and then has remorse: What is it all for if there is no family? If there is no one to come back to? Divorces and separations are a scourge and a frequent cause of suicide among soldiers" (Kolesnychenko 2024: <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/ludzie-sie-koncza-6981373556255232a>, retrieved 8.01.2023).

the trench, a tiny, lived space, has a condensed lived time that helps the person survive. The soldier is in isolation for many days and suffering from it. The body must eat and drink; how many days? When the body is alive, the soldier is alive. The lived body expresses suffering and the will to survive (Narozhna 2022; Dutta 2021). It is fed so that it will stay alive, at least for some time, here and now. Only the present time is felt. The coda of this passage, “All around was pure hell,” expresses the chaos, suffering, and hopelessness associated with all the ongoing battles in the war. However, when the body is alive, the soldier is alive. The space of the trench turned out to be a “place” (see Yi-Fu Tuan 1987) protecting the body (and relatively safe), and the “space” outside the trench turned out to be “pure hell.”

The Deathworld appears to have zones. The trench zone is also a deadly space, but to a lesser extent than the open space outside the trench.⁷ In the Deathworld, space becomes nuanced, although the shadow of death continually advances with each soldier. Sometimes, open space can be a realm of the Lifeworld for soldiers (for example, when they can escape from the trap of a trench or bunker). The lived body is connected with the lived space and produced together.

The narrator contemplates family and incomplete tasks in the realm of life (see the quotation below);⁸ the time horizon momentarily shifts, and the significance of the future takes center stage. The Deathworld is around and coming personally to the narrator, but he is still in the practical Lifeworld in his imagination. He contemplates death. The experience of time, here and now, changes his assumptions about accepting death. The direct threat changes his attitudes (I think that mine would change, too):

I was lying at the bottom of my grave thinking that even though I had accepted my death long ago, I was still not prepared for this death right now. My wife doesn't know how to pay utility bills; I didn't leave her my email and internet banking passwords; and there are parcels in the mail that I didn't have time to tell her about (Chekh 2023).

His contemplation continues. Positive emotions appear, and love for those closest to him. His mind is divided, with one part saying, “I want to survive,” while the other says, “I will be killed.” The mindful imagination works very hard, fantasizing about possible death. The emotional mix and emotional flux are speedy, changing, and chaotic:

At the same time, I thought about what I would do if I survived. There is such a possibility—to survive. Well, then, I would write a message. I would say, “My love, I survived.” But it was difficult to think about a happy ending. I preferred dreaming about my death, when, soaked to the bone by the rain, after falling asleep for an hour under the artillery fire, I would be killed by a Russian shell (Chekh 2023).

⁷ Open space can be a death space. The Ukrainian soldier treats his activities in the war as work: “Dawn. Fine snow dusted the yellowed grass. Three Russian soldiers creep toward Ukrainian positions. ‘Antifryz,’ the pilot of the “Foxtrot” aerial reconnaissance group, presses a button on the joystick. The drone drops a grenade. The two survivors cover themselves with the wounded man. This one is still moving. ‘Antifryz’ considers the morning a success. He pulls a long chain of grenade pins from his pocket. ‘A garland for the Christmas tree.’ Except that the mood is far from festive.” (Kolesnychenko 2024: <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/ludzie-sie-koncza-6981373556255232a>, retrieved 8.01.2023).

⁸ A Ukrainian journalist described this situation empathically in her report. Thinking about family can be contrasted with the difficult living conditions at the front. The embodiment of memory of family is presented in the quote below. Family is associated with warmth; the front line with the smell of damp earth, squeaking mice, the explosion of projectiles, and bodily fatigue (Kolesnychenko 2024). Family is also important for those who are not on the front line: “God, I don't want to die now. I want to live. I love my loved ones so much. I want them to do well. We still have so much to do together” (Kovalova's narrative in Sneed et al. 2023: 348).

There is fear of death, isolation, suffering, questions: “Why? For what?” Here is the answer from a first-person perspective:

How could I not pick up a weapon here? For those who lived for many decades in the cozy arms of democracy and freedom, who don’t know the fear of captivity and torture, it is difficult to understand why such peaceful people—who from time immemorial grew wheat, mined iron and coal, and grazed cattle on boundless meadows—are defending every meter of their country with such fury. But I know the answer. This is our wonderful land. And it must be free (Chekh 2023).

Justifications are given, but they are strongly linked to values. We need motives for our activities, especially when faced with extreme choices and situations that result from participation in combat. The narrator wants to explain the Ukrainians’ determination to defend their motherland, which cannot always be understood in the West. Love for the country (the “wonderful land”) and “freedom” are values for which the author may fight. Patriotic feelings are expressed mainly by people away from the frontline. There should be a space and time for contemplation. This kind of contemplation takes place in the pathic mode:

At the same time, something else is beginning to emerge, something very genuine. Pride that I am Ukrainian. A feeling of love for the Ukrainian language. Interest in the history of Ukraine and its culture. It feels like something familiar, full of light and warmth. This realization gives me hope, and along with this warmth, there also grows hatred and intolerance for everything Russian—everything, with no exception (Kateryna Tomova’s narrative in Sneed et al. 2023: 355).

My Contemplative Coda

I must take a break from these explications. *I feel guilty* when I read articles on the war and Chekh’s book, *Absolute Zero*. I live in a safe apartment; I have a fridge full of food and a comfortable life. I can look at the stars, and I don’t have to look for incoming bombers (although I feel they will come here) or drones. I can admire the full moon and the stars in the September sky. My lived space is completely different from Chekh’s. But at the same time, I think about those soldiers lying in the trenches, in mud and dirt, scared but angry. The idea of defending the homeland is somewhere in the back of my consciousness, but here and now, there is fear of death, tense nerves, and all my senses are aware of the surroundings and want to defend my body (see Näser-Lather 2016). After all, that is what senses were made for. Animal existence is very real; after all, mine is identical, only covered with a thin layer of culture still untouched by threat and war. I watch the moon getting bigger and brighter; what a relief that it’s not an approaching ball of fire—a rocket that can reach me. I breathe deeply.

When I looked at a picture of a Ukrainian soldier kneeling in a trench full of mud and water, looking up, I thought: Why does this happen? Why the hell must people suffer this way in the twenty-first century? I was angry; I was angry at that. People are still evil-doers (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/10/opinion/ukraine-war-bakhmut.html>). I understand the sociological explanations of how ideologies, politics, the economy, nationalisms, and colonial mentalities can create wars full of suffering (Ehrenreich 2011). Still, I think that behind these explanations is just the pure, biological joy of killing strangers and taking

their territory. We are still brute creatures and use culture to justify aggression. This belief is valid for me; it is what I feel at this moment of writing. This does not mean we should stop explaining the cultural and socio-economic reasons for the war. They are still important. But at the same time, I should be aware of how thin the cultural coat is that covers my brutal skeleton.⁹

Contemplative Explication Continued...

The Deathworld dominates soldiers' minds. Their emotions are seen on their faces. Traumatic experience gives the soldiers a different view of the Lifeworld and motivation to live. The bulletproof vest becomes the cover of their bodies, which, like their minds, are always on the alert. Their eyes show emptiness. Trauma is the backdrop of the soldiers' everyday life; fear and hopelessness never leave them. It is even better to die, as one soldier said:

Recently, one of the companies in our battalion returned from a mission in eastern Ukraine. When we saw our comrades a month earlier, they had been smiling and cheerful. Now they don't even talk to one another, never take off their bulletproof vests, and don't smile at all. Their eyes are empty and dark like dry wells. These fighters lost a third of their comrades, and one of them said that he would rather be dead, because now he is afraid to live (Chekh 2022).

What is going on in the mind and heart of a soldier? Fear of death, a permanent consciousness of mortality. It's a good time for contemplation. Feeling the end is palatable; death is next to him; it is a neighbor and follower. However, the willingness to live is extreme, and words have motivational power; the time to die has not yet come.

In the 10 months I spent on the front line near Popasna, in the Luhansk region, I thought often about death. I could feel its quiet steps and calm breathing next to me. But something told me no, not this time (Chekh 2022).¹⁰

Accepting death is a point of transforming the self (see also Chekh 2022). The anxiety vanishes, and bravery comes. Is this the experience of brave, unstoppable soldiers? Is war a situation for self-development? Such people become this way because they experience the trauma of war and adapt to it in this way. The negative pathic dimension of the

⁹ Concerning this topic, I wrote the following poem, "About Culture in One Sentence," to address the problem:

I search for culture, especially in places,
that bear names related to culture, cultural, with culture,
and I don't find it there,
it seems to have vanished,
driven away, crushed by the name, which pushed it,
into an ideal reality,
to leave empty letters down here, envy, aggression, hatred,
and that's why it's a good feeling.

¹⁰ During the First World War, another soldier, a volunteer, grappled with the conflicting emotions of fearing death and longing to live, contemplating both sentiments: "Yesterday, I was fired at. I fell apart! I was afraid of death! I now have such a strong wish to live! And it is hard to renounce life once one is fond of it. That is precisely what sin is, an unreasonable life, a wrong view of life. From time to time, I become an animal" (Wittgenstein 2022: 185).

perception of war (fear and anxiety, mental rejection of the situation) changes and becomes more balanced. The narrator already inhabits the Deathworld—“my death, as an almost accomplished fact”:

But I have accepted the possibility of my death, as an almost accomplished fact. Crossing this Rubicon has calmed me down, made me braver, stronger, more balanced. It must be thus for those who consciously tread the path of war (Chekh 2022).¹¹

I find a similar awareness of death in a poem by Maksym Kryvcov. Writing poetry can also be a way of dealing with the trauma of war. Kryvcov was a soldier on the front line:

My head rolls from thicket to thicket
 as
 it rolls across a field
 or a ball
 my hands detached
 will grow violets in the spring
 my legs
 will be torn by dogs and cats
 my blood
 will dye the world in a new Pantone red
 human blood
 my bones
 will drag the earth
 and form a skeleton
 my shotgun
 will rust
 poor guy
 my change and equipment
 will be handed over to the new recruits
 so that spring will come sooner
 to finally
 bloom with violets
 (<https://lubimyczytac.pl/jeszcze-wczoraj-czytal-swoje-wiersze-ukrainski-poeta-maksym-krywcow-zginal-na-frontcie>; KTK translation; retrieved 3.02.2024)

The Deathworld is spreading, and this war liquidates even people’s names; the identities of the dead vanish like their bodies and existence. The anonymous bodies indicate the “catastrophic” character of the war, which takes lives daily. We see closed coffins that are real, but that also symbolize the cruelty and sadness of the war and hopelessness:

This is another kind of war, and the losses are, without exaggeration, catastrophic. We no longer know the names of all the dead: There are dozens of them every day. Ukrainians constantly mourn those lost; there are rows of closed coffins in the central squares of relatively calm cities across the country. Closed coffins are the terrible reality of this cruel, bloody, and seemingly endless war (Czech 2022).

The senses are an important part of the lived body in experiencing the war. I become immersed in the experience of death and mourning by capturing the essence of the scent of

¹¹ Similar thoughts came to Wittgenstein during the war on the front line. The acceptance of death also means accepting life: “I may die in an hour; I may die in two hours. I may die in a month or only in few years; I can’t know and I can’t do anything either for or against it. That’s how life is. How then must I live so as to be prepared for that moment? One must live for the good and the beautiful until life ends of its own accord” (Wittgenstein 2022: 59).

death.¹² Soldiers also have to heighten their awareness of their surroundings by perceiving with all their senses (Näser-Lather 2016; Sookermary 2011). The sense of smell plays a crucial part in wartime narratives among civilians, too; it transforms into a tool for bearing witness to death:

There was a mass grave that held 300 people, and I was standing at its edge. The chalky body bags were piled up in the pit, exposed. One moment before, I was a different person, someone who never knew how wind smelled after it passed over the dead on a pleasant summer afternoon. In mid-June, those corpses were far from a complete count of the civilians killed by shelling in the area around the industrial city of Lysychansk over the previous two months. They were only “the ones who did not have anyone to bury them in a garden or a backyard,” a soldier said casually. He lit a cigarette while we looked at the grave. The smoke obscured the smell (Yermak 2022).

The sense of hearing works differently in wartime, anticipating danger and possible death. It can be one of the causes of trauma when exposure to the loud noise of rockets or bombs increases hypervigilance and stress levels (see Näser-Lather 2016):

It felt different in the west, away from the front. In the Donbas, almost every sudden odd noise was exactly what you suspected it to be: something lethal flying nearby, seeking out the living (Yermak 2022).

Bodily sensations bear witness to the trauma of war:

...unsuspecting people—children among them—blasted apart or burned alive inside malls and medical centers in broad daylight. It left tight knots in our stomachs, but they hadn’t transformed yet into something almost genetic, a terror that would be passed on to their offspring by the survivors of this war (Yermak, NYT, 08.08.2022).¹³

After encountering the harsh realities of war through the senses, individuals often find themselves contemplating general concepts, a phenomenon illustrated in the narrative above, where the author reflects on the transmission of trauma through generations. The soldier also contemplates death. Death, in his thoughts, could take various forms, including a dignified death (a general, abstract term in this context, tinged with pathos) or a “normal” end, if I can use such a term to describe this process. Dying during war is entirely different, often in nightmare-like circumstances. The fight is not only for life but also for the commonness of death.

Dying in barbaric conditions is reminiscent of medieval times for the narrator:

To quote Kurt Vonnegut, even if wars didn’t keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death. But encounters with death could be very different. We want to believe that we and our loved ones, the modern people of the twenty-first century, no longer have to die from medieval barbaric torture, epidemics, or detention in concentration camps. That’s part of what we’re fighting for: the right not only to a dignified life but also to a dignified death (Chekh 2022).¹⁴

¹² According to a Ukrainian journalist, the smell is overwhelming: “He is in his mid-40s, with a long beard and prominent belly. Every day, he delivers the bodies of those killed in Avdiyivka to the morgue in nearby Pokrovsk. The stench of decomposition is musty here. Over two years of war, it has eaten into the walls of the morgue and the surrounding blocks of flats. It floats for hundreds of meters, making it impossible to catch one’s breath” (Kolesnychenko 2024: <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/ludzie-sie-koncza-6981373556255232a>, retrieved 8.01.2023).

¹³ But it is possible that the terror will last in future memories and will be passed to the next generations (Dutta 2021: 211). A similar opinion was expressed by Ukrainian psychotherapist Zoryana Koshulynska: “That and many other experiences brought me to the most painful realization—that these children will always be children of war. I, as a psychologist, as a psychotherapist—understand this very well” (see in Sneed et al. 2023: 358).

¹⁴ Dignified death can also be connected with the dignified treatment of dead bodies. It often happens during war that bodies are desecrated, and parts, such as skulls, may be treated as trophies of war (Harrison 2012).

At some point in time, silence appears in the Deathworld. Soldiers do not want to talk; the silence is a choice; it can be a sign of solitude¹⁵ but also proof of understanding. There is no need to communicate with words; everything is understood. The traumatic situation is the background for understanding the gestures and silence of the night. The body mainly communicates, and understanding comes without words, spontaneously, pre-reflectively. Meaning is conveyed without the use of words:¹⁶

I stop socializing. More than that, I stop talking. Oh, maybe accidentally I exchange some words: “Hi, what are you up to?” “Sure, oh, okay”... We hardly ever even speak to each other in our bunker. Everyone keeps to themselves. Some watch a movie; I write. Or I also watch. And then write some more. And then go to my post... It seemed like that would be the place to talk, but we are silent, as if we are afraid of disturbing the cold, quiet night. As if we aren’t friends. As if we just met (Chekh 2020, chapter “Silence,” paragraph one).

Seven months on the front—that’s when you understand everything, but you have no desire to speak, when speaking isn’t necessary, but you understand everything.” (Chekh 2020, chapter “A Lifetime and Little More,” paragraph nine).

Silence pertains to a collective comprehension of the existential implications of what has transpired—an unspoken acknowledgment of the underlying realities of past and present actions, the conduct of war, which no longer necessitates an explicit explanation. The initial understanding of another person begins with a visceral awareness of their presence in physical proximity. I sense them more profoundly than I comprehend them in my immediate space. Verbal communication seems superfluous; familiarity arises from shared physical existence in a shared place over time. As soldiers spend considerable time together, a more profound connection evolves, allowing for the exchange of intimate details. Silence and quietness emerge when the “we-relationship” has developed. In this situation, there is camaraderie among soldiers:

For a parting gift, Vlad gets us a bottle of wine. I accompany him to headquarters. We embrace, we cry. He drives away and I go back to the outpost with a bottle of dry red wine and half a kilo of wieners. That evening Sanya and I sit by the fire and talk a lot. We get drunk from the wine, as if it was vodka. Having had our fill of the wieners, we sit poking at the coals with skewers and think about everything that has happened in the last fourteen months. Later, already in our bunker, lying in our sleeping bags, we spend a long time sharing secrets and revelations. It seemed that if we didn’t do it now, we never would (Chekh 2020, chapter “The Last Night” paragraph two).

Silence also emerges in certain situations where not only is there no need to speak to understand, but it is also the only possible response to the trauma that has occurred. Death and burial can be such a situation. It is the ultimate silence, a concluding silence for some soldiers, marking the end of the nightmares of war. Silence then becomes a witness to death and mourning:

¹⁵ Loneliness is a widespread feeling among soldiers; they interact with animals to feel some intimacy. Touching the animals is important, such as a cat in the bunker: “Loneliness afflicts everyone. Eduard reaches out to pick up the black and white male cat, still curled up, sleeping on his bunk a moment ago. He cuddles it and scratches it behind the ear (Kolesnycheno 2024: <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/ludzie-sie-koncza-6981373556255232a>, retrieved 8.01.2023). Individuals cope with the trauma (coping self); living with animals helps (Myers and Sweeney 2004).

¹⁶ “The person on the frontline is gradually overcome by an overwhelming sense of meaningfulness which would be hard to put into words.” (Patočka 1996: 126) Moreover, the body serves as a communicator of emotional states, including depression, as illustrated by Wittgenstein (2022: 139): “Situation unchanged!—, No work. Depression. The pressure on the chest—, —.” The war becomes embodied here, and the *pathic* dimension is easily observed. The wartime routine entailed intellectual endeavors for Wittgenstein, not solely combat, a rarity in his military service while writing the diary we know and can read.

There was no thud of artillery or shriek from a missile, just the quiet hum of a funeral procession” (Yermak 2022).

Communicating with Opponents Regarding my Perceptions of the War

With the interpretations and descriptions of lived experiences and understandings mentioned above, I engage in conversations with individuals from countries far removed from the conflict. I often struggle to comprehend when they attempt to normalize the situation or analyze the war from technical, economic, or political perspectives. My perspective on this war is shaped predominantly by the firsthand experiences of those involved. However, I am not a direct participant; I apply the principle of empathy, and strive, if only in my imagination, to place myself in the victims’ shoes (Konecki 2022; Ruiz 2017). I know this is entirely impossible, but I make the effort, nonetheless.

What do I feel when I do this? I experience profound fear, anger directed at the aggressors, and even a sense of hatred, though these emotions are not aligned with my usual values. Over nearly two years of war, there is also a growing sense of indifference. While these emotions are not identical to those experienced by the actual participants and victims of the war, they share similarities, albeit in a hypothetical context.

When I hear expressions of sympathy for Russians, Russian artists, and athletes who cannot perform or compete in the West, I am overwhelmed with anger and frustration due to the lack of empathy and understanding for the victims and the war’s context. The question of who constitutes the aggressor and who the victim becomes particularly relevant. While it is true that Russian recruits, often deceived and sent to the frontlines, are victims of this conflict, they are being used as tools by the aggressor, whose intentions include seizing neighboring land, causing harm to countless families, looting resources like grain and coal, and demolishing family homes. This question of “who is the victim and who is the aggressor” often marks the endpoint of such conversations and discussions. I frequently argue as follows: “Would you have agreed to Leni Riefenstahl’s visiting the United States during the Second World War to promote her films? Would other prominent German artists and scholars who supported Hitler have been welcomed to perform in free nations? Could Martin Heidegger have given lectures at Harvard during the Second World War? The situation is analogous; it’s a wartime scenario. The Russians’ behavior in Ukraine resembles that of the Nazis during the Second World War and their occupations. How would you respond to this question?”

Conclusions

Concluding becomes a formidable task when confronted with the harrowing accounts of war atrocities and the profound suffering endured by war’s victims and soldiers on the front line. “The front line is absurdity par excellence. What we had only suspected here becomes reality: all that humans hold most precious is ruthlessly torn to shreds. The only meaning is that of a proof that the world capable of producing something like this must disappear...” (Patočka 1996: 126). The world may vanish, but does the experience of war

and the front line shift attitudes toward it? Patočka is not overly optimistic: “How can the ‘front-line experience’ acquire the form which would make it a factor of history? Why is it not becoming that? Because in the form described so powerfully by Teilhard and Junger, it is the experience of all individuals projected individually each to their summit, from which they cannot but retreat back to everydayness, where they will inevitably be seized again by war in the form of Force’s plan for peace” (Patočka 1996: 134). There is not much solidarity with those buffeted by the war; maintaining awareness of the common and traumatic experiences on both sides of the front line could create a more meaningful historical factor. To accomplish this, I adhere to a pathic understanding of war and its dereification. In the future, a more holistic perspective from both sides of the front line will be essential.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it’s important to acknowledge that the distance achieved through contemplation could potentially result in indifference, and this represents an ethical decision.

I have tried to dereify the concept of war. I have presented how the war is embodied as a pathic experience, full of fears, trauma, and horrors, and how it is embodied by experiencing space and time in the overwhelming Deathworld. War is not only a matter of fighting, as is commonly assumed in critical discourse studies or strategic military approaches (see the critics of these approaches in Narozhna 2022). War also creates the tactics of survival and endurance (Dutta 2021). The war is a Deathworld, which keeps soldiers and civilians alive for a time but with the threat of death. The Deathworld changes the meaning of space and time; the lived body predominantly experiences the war and cognizes it directly. Time is condensed in the present; sometimes, the horizon changes to memories of family and those who are closest; there are also projections about the future that connect individuals with their nearest and dearest. However, the present trauma of war generally shatters the future horizon.

The Deathworld has been proven to have zones. The trench zone is also a deadly space, but to a lesser extent than the open space beyond the trench. In the Deathworld, space nuances itself, although the shadow of death always advances with every soldier. In those explications, I may uncover pathic war experiences, touching on topics like the

¹⁷ What follows is the narrative of Russian soldiers: “Then I heard (the Ukrainians) approaching us; I started shouting ‘We surrender.’ Then they threw a grenade at us,” he says. “I felt it cut my hand. They asked me who I am, and I said that I am Russian and that I surrender. I started to get up, and a second grenade arrived. I managed to crawl halfway out of the trench in a second,” he tells CNN. The Russian soldier behind him was killed by the grenade and Sergei felt a cut through his leg.

A Ukrainian soldier later explained that it’s difficult to hear what the Russian soldiers are saying during gun-fights (<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/06/europe/captured-russian-soldiers-ukraine-intl-cmd/index.html>, 06.07.2023; retrieved 15.09.2023). The horror of war is experienced on both sides of the front line:

“Unlike the rest, he is a contract soldier, not a convict. He says he served the time he signed up for last year in Kherson. After he got back home, he says the military prosecutor threatened him with prison for desertion if he did not go back to the battlefield. The young father says his previous military experience did not prepare him for what both sides call the ‘meat grinder’ in Bakhmut. ‘It was very different from what I saw on TV. A parallel reality. I felt fear, pain, and disappointment in my commanders,’ he says...Sergei believes his injuries will keep him away from future deployments and out of prison once he is exchanged with Ukrainian prisoners of war. Slava and Anton are not so sure. Russia toughened up its penalties for voluntary surrender last September, imposing up to 10 years in prison” (<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/06/europe/captured-russian-soldiers-ukraine-intl-cmd/index.html>, 06.07.2023; retrieved 15.09.2023).

fear of death, acceptance of mortality, the silence of war, a departure from established worldviews, attempts to preserve the body, the scent of death, the definition of one's place, the desire to live, and more. By dereifying the concept of space as a territory of war (in a geographic and strategic military sense; Carter 2010), I can reveal its pathic and embodied significance, emphasizing the lived space. The text has also highlighted the contemplative role of the perceiver, the reader, who depicts the war to himself in a pathic manner. It has underscored that dereification necessitates a subject to interpret the lived experiences of others, by actively participating, even imaginatively, in their Lifeworld.

Rather than attempting a definitive conclusion, let us delve deeper into the emotional resonance of the war, reexamining its impact with empathy and pathos, to dereify it further. Expressing these sentiments in prose proves to be a challenging endeavor.

To summarize my exploration, I would like to conclude this paper with photos collages (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6vTbtSu13M>), and three poems that I wrote during pivotal moments of the war. They center on the lily-of-the-valley flower, which symbolizes the transient nature of innocence and beauty, but also renewal and new beginnings. Through poetry, I aim to preserve the empathetic understanding that defines my perspective and experience of war as an outsider observing this traumatic phenomenon. Finally, I believe that despite everything, some hope can be derived from the symbolism of lilies of the valley.

I don't write haikus about death (May 2022)

It's spring.
 I do not see flowers in Bucha
 or Mariupol in the pictures.
 I can't see, they can't see,
 but some flowers are still there?!
 I go to the balcony
 It is a dark May night
 Lilies of the valley

The lilies of the valley remember (May 2023)

The lilies of the valley are in bloom again.
 They remember,
 the war has been going on for over a year now, nothing changes,
 or instead, it is changing,
 there is more cruelty,
 lies,
 torture and rape,
 broken homes
 and crying children and mothers.
 Fathers are in short supply.
 The lilies of the valley want to live,
 more and more of them bloom on the balcony,
 More and more bombs, gunshots,

the terrifying sounds of falling rockets.
 The lilies of the valley pay no heed to these hardships,
 they only want water and my gaze,
 to keep them beautiful.

Lily of the Valley and Kharkov (May 2024)

This year I did not write a poem
 About lilies of the valley in bloom
 I wrote about lilies of the valley dying
 About the killed
 Forgotten
 Frightened
 Having no hope
 Not yet murdered
 Those waiting
 For the next spring
 Without a fearful look upward
 Brave to the east
 And forgiving to the west

Silence

Fullness of love
 And empathy
 In the moon setting
 Over the withered
 Flowers of Hope
 Of mothers crying
 Without a day of mourning

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