Shock (Im)mobilities Special Section: African Migrants in the Ukraine War

Curated by Mengnjo Tardzenyuy Thomas[1]

1. Outsiders' shock (im)mobility in the war

Biao Xiang[2]

Abstract

This is a preface to the collection of entries on "African migrants in the Ukraine War" curated by Mengnjo Tardzenyuy Thomas. African migrants embody the position of the "outsider" in the war – people who do not take a position in the war but who are caught up in battle. The outsiders' experiences with shock (im)mobility demonstrate the far-reaching ethical implications of the war.

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[1] Mengnjo Tardzenyuy Thomas is a lecturer, researcher and consultant in public policy and administration at the University of Bamenda in Cameroon. He holds a PhD in political science from the University of Dschang, Cameroon. mengnjothomas218@gmail.com

[2] Biao Xiang. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany. xiang@eth.mpg.de

Shock (im)mobility is the mobility or immobility that people experience in response to abrupt social disruptions. For instance, people may flee a disaster zone without a destination in mind, which could lead to complicated journeys. Conversely, people may cease routine mobility and isolate themselves to avoid dangers posed by a disruption. While forced migration and refugee flows have attracted much attention, short-term shock (im)mobilities, especially those that do not lead to protracted, large-scale refugee flows, have been little studied.

Shock (im)mobility is not specific to migrants. It is a general human response to sudden changes. But migrants' experiences with shock (im)mobility raise interesting questions because of their specific positionality. If shock (im)mobility is a "shock" to residents who are close to home and who have routinized mobility patterns, is it still a shock for those who are already on the move and already away from home? The material accumulated at the MoLab Inventory so far suggests that shock (im)mobility can be even more dramatic and consequential for migrants, except for the very privileged few. This is partly because shock (im)mobility upsets the relations between the different types of (im)mobility, relations that are particularly delicate and consequential for many migrants. For instance, many temporary migrant workers' lives are organized around the alternation between leaving home to work elsewhere and a seasonal return home. Migrant construction workers' lives are patterned by long-distance migration to cities, where they live in construction sites where no mobility is allowed. Once the relations between the different types of mobility, and between mobility and immobility, are disrupted, migrants are thrown into limbo. During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), for example, some migrants had to rush home before a job project was completed and wages had been paid, or had to move out from crowded dormitories and look for private housing, of which they had no knowledge.[3]

This set of entries, "African migrants in the Ukraine War", continues this line of inquiry. The entries collectively raise the question of what shock (im)mobility means to "outsiders" who are perceived as being on neither side of the conflict. It is as an embodiment of the outsider position that the category of "African migrants" is used here. In other words, "African migrants" should not be understood as an empirically given category. There are many types of "African" migrants – diplomats, traders, labourers, students, and so-called "illegals", all of whom have different experiences. But the category "African migrants" makes sense analytically because it represents a visible outsider. Unlike Russians or Germans in Ukraine, Africans are seen as unrelated to either side of the war. As Mfobujong (this collection) notes, the Tanzanian government advised Tanzanian students in Ukraine to carry their national flags while leaving the conflict zone. This gesture is typical of the outsider. Furthermore, the colour of the African migrants' skin makes them stand out in the human tide. While Africans, Ukrainian and EU citizens flee from the battlefield in a similar way, the meaning of their flight and the responses they receive in local society and in the bordering countries appear to be very different. Do the Ukrainian and EU publics feel that African migrants deserve special protection because they are caught up in a conflict in which they have no stake and for which they would never be held responsible? Or are they less deserving than Ukrainians because they are not directly targeted? Does the host show more sympathy towards

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[3] For more elaborate discussions on the distributive nature of mobility in general, and shock (im)mobility in particular, see Xiang, B. 2022. How COVID-19 has re-distributed human mobility. Current History 121(838): 304–309; and Biao Xiang, William L. Allen, Shahram Khosravi, Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, Yasmin Y. Ortiga, Karen Anne S. Liao, Jorge E. Cuéllar, Lamea Momen, Priya Deshingkar, and Mukta Naik. 2022. Shock mobilities during moments of acute uncertainty. Geopolitics.

outsiders when the host is calling for global sympathy? Or is the host less generous when in distress? In sum, what is the position of the "outsider" when the hosts' life is dominated by the antagonism between friend and enemy? These ethical questions cannot be fully addressed through theoretical reasoning alone. We need empirical observations about what people on the ground, in specific contexts, do, think and feel, in order to productively continue the discussion. This collection does just that.

Among the many suggestive observations represented in this set of entries, three deserve special attention in my opinion. First, anecdotal evidence suggests that while outsiders are as prone to shock mobility as residents, outsiders are more likely to end in the situation of involuntary shock immobility. Outsiders have less access to means of transport, local knowledge about safety routes, and social networks that help to arrange quick exit. They are therefore more likely to be stuck where they are until external assistance arrives.

Second, discrimination against African migrants appears widespread, and to have worsened. African migrants were prevented from embarking on buses or trains in Ukraine by public transport staff; they were pushed back into Ukraine by border police on both sides of the border; and they were neglected while stranded, even though many of these migrants were students with valid papers. While the solidarity that emerged among people across most parts of Europe to support Ukraine is truly remarkable, some attitudes towards outsiders like African migrants also show that such solidarity has its limits. The solidarity is more based on a shared enemy than a shared global vision about what a fair world and decent life looks like.

Third, the entries show that African migrants and governments, NGOs and individuals are creating what may be called a "third space": a space of action that is beyond the defining antagonism (between Russia and the West), and is based on connections across political units. As many African states do not have diplomatic missions in Ukraine, embassies and consulates from different African countries located in different parts of central and eastern Europe – including in Russia – coordinate with one another to arrange collective evacuation. African states successfully negotiated with Poland, Romania and other countries neighbouring Ukraine to admit fleeing African citizens. African migrants, both in and outside Ukraine, set up networks, especially through social media, to provide real-time information to guide Africans to flee through safe routes. A *Black Women for Black Lives* campaign was launched in the UK which raised more than £300,000 and helped more than 2000 Africans in the war zone in the first five weeks (Mfobujong; this collection). A Pan-African solidarity is clearly discernible, as evidenced by the active #AfricansinUkraine Twitter account. Thus, the third *space* is not the same as the third or neutral *party*.

I must stress that paying attention to such a "third space" does not mean circumventing the ethical question of whether the war is right or wrong. Rather, the third space allows for engaging in ethical considerations without taking a particular position on one side or the other. It questions the position that the only right outcome should be the total victory of one side, and thus the escalation of conflicts as inevitable and even desirable. The war has to end, and may well end without clear-cut victory or defeat. Global relations after the war should not be organized according to the binary of right versus wrong, winner versus loser. Actions in the third space are based on more nuanced, pragmatic, and flexible considerations. This space, in fact, represents the majority of the world population. But so far this third space remains "silent" in global debate about the war and the future

world order.[4] In order to articulate the voice of the third space, bottom-up efforts at documenting, analysing and systematizing "outsiders'" actual experiences can be more important than abstract, normative argumentation. Experience-based analysis can free us from the hegemonic framework, and open up more realistic and hopeful alternatives. I hope this collection and future follow-up will contribute to such efforts.

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[4] On the silent Global South in the war, see the MoLab conversation between Samaddar, R. and Xiang, B. (2023). The Russia-Ukraine war: a view from the southern left. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 174-180.