

THE EFFECTS OF WAR: PRAGUE'S TANGO COMMUNITY AFTER THE START OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract: This article examines the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war on the Prague tango community. For six years, the author has been attending local milongas (social tango dance gatherings), and for the last five years, has developed an ethnography of Prague's tango life, using soundscape analysis as a heuristic tool, and correlating the collected data with the translocal phenomenon of tango. The specific ways of experiencing wartime conditions and sharing solidarity which have arisen at the Prague milongas in response to the events in Ukraine have been identified. In addition to directly supporting Ukraine through donations, the soundscape of "the effects of war" appears to confront part of the community with the transience of the tango experience.

Keywords: the effects of war; soundscape; translocal phenomenon of tango; Prague tango community

Introduction

Since the end of February 2022, I have had the fortunate opportunity to get acquainted with several Ukrainian women who recently left their homeland because of the war happening there. I made their acquaintance in quite unusual circumstances – on the dance floor. Once in Prague, these women began to attend tango parties (milongas) actively, and their presence could not help but affect the local tango community. In this article, I want to discuss the changes I have observed in these Prague *milongas* since the start of the war in Ukraine. I will begin with an introduction to the Prague scene of tango, the broader context of the translocal tango phenomenon, and a discussion of the

methodology of my study. Then I will describe how the local *milongas* have been held since the start of the war in Ukraine and offer my interpretation of the data obtained.

Positioning

I am a *tanguero*, which means I dance at *milongas*. I started dancing tango 16 years ago in Moscow. From the very beginning of my journey, I have been fascinated by how encounters between two people take shape in the act of dancing tango together. As a psychologist from Russia, I began attending Prague milongas in 2018, one year after my emigration. In 2019, I enrolled in the anthropology doctoral program at Charles University to study the Prague tango community. I am particularly interested in the encounters of the local tango scene, their poetics, and how they interconnect with Argentine tango as a translocal social dance practised all over the world.

The Prague tango scene

During the period of totalitarian rule, social tango disappeared from public life in Czechoslovakia and only returned to the big cities at the beginning of the new millennium, thanks to dancers Mark Štefan and Kateřina Mališová, who learned the basics in London (Vojířová 2015: 15-51). Nowadays, more than ten tango dance schools in Prague provide lessons for *tangueras* and *tangueros*. The teachers at the above-mentioned schools try to make dance improvisation as easy as possible for their students at *milongas*. In Prague, you can learn the basic principles of dance interaction in tango as well as different dance styles (Gotlib 2024).

The actors in my research – Prague *tangueras* and *tangueros*, among whom you find not only ethnic Czechs of different ages and professions but also Slovaks, Ukrainians, Russians, Italians, Argentines, and people from other countries who, for various reasons, live in Prague – practice tango *Argentino* as an improvised social dance. Compared to other tango scenes, the Prague scene is not very big, nor is it small. There are four or five regular *milongas* in Prague, usually small in size (rarely exceeding 20 dancing couples), which may rotate between venues; each has its own history linked to certain locations in Prague. Larger festive *milongas*, which attract over 100 dancers, are organised in Prague several times a year.

Members of the Prague community can be roughly divided into different groups, among which we find people who identify themselves with one of the local schools; lovers of tango music, for whom it is very important what melodies are played at the *milongas*; and *tangueras* and *tangueros*, who like to talk and dance mainly among themselves; as well as those who like to meet unfamiliar faces, lovers of dance experiments, and the followers of traditions. As in other communities, there is a certain segregation in Prague tango: certain women are invited to dance more often than others.

The translocal phenomenon of tango

I propose considering revival, ritual, and freedom as key aspects of the translocal phenomenon of tango. By “revival” I mean an attempt by the tango lovers to renew the practice that unites them.¹ Although *tangueras* and *tangueros* have, at different times and in different countries, succumbed to a fascination with retro, they have been (and remain) engaged in reviving (giving a second or third breath to) those traditions that would otherwise be subject to musealization (Conde 2004; Savigliano 1995). The type of activity I refer to here as “ritual” focuses more on separating local, currently relevant tango dance traditions from dance forms characteristic of other social and cultural contexts.² Within the “ritual of the tango”, dance interactions become more predictable and formalised (Petridou 2009). At the same time, social tango is also the creation of new forms of meeting. Thanks to “freedom”, tango ceases to be an isolated genre and turns out to be a way of expressing different attitudes and to be a translocal dialogue that brings something new to the life of each community (Miller et al. 2014).

The three aspects described by me in my cultural-historical review of the translocal phenomenon of tango provide a framework that suggests three questions I focus on in my ethnography of Prague tango life:

1. Which elements of the translocal phenomenon of tango are the participants of the observed *milonga* reviving?
2. In what form and through what ritual are these elements reproduced?
3. What values or feelings do they express thereby?

¹ To familiarise yourself with the variety of meanings this term carries in the context of ethnographic studies of music and dance communities, see The Oxford Handbook of Musical Revival (Bithell and Hill 2014).

² Here I draw on Marc Augé’s theory of restricted ritual (1999).

The methodology of the ethnographic study

Using the method of participant observation, I take so-called ethnographic snapshots (Jurkova 2014) of the Prague *milongas* that I regularly visit.³ At these *milongas*, I do not hide that I am conducting ethnography, but for local dancers, apparently, this does not play a big role. Guests of any *milonga* switch roles all the time: some observe, some dance, and some talk, among other things, asking each other about their experiences. Hence, while collecting data for my research, I can freely switch between these roles without disrupting the course of the *milongas* I attend. At the same time, the “vocabulary” of tango as a translocal dance offers a good basis for analysing the dance interactions I witness. Knowing the practical meaning of terms such as “dynamics”, “body contact”, and “balance”, which are common in the Prague tango community, I use them to conduct descriptions of dance interactions that emphasise qualitative aspects of movement (Novack 1990; Sklar 2001).

The concept of soundscape (Shelemay 2006; Jurkova 2014) helps me explore the fluid life of the Prague tango community, where different cycles change and new social topics emerge. The choice of this concept is determined by the necessary variable of the meetings of Prague’s *tangueras* and *tangueros*, which is the music of tango (sound), and by the couples who, through moving together counterclockwise, form a circle (scape). Any *milonga* begins the moment the tango music starts playing and ends the second the last couple leaves the dance floor. The social and physical landscapes of the *milonga* are interdependent on the tango melodies set up by a DJ or played by live musicians. Another inspiration for my research is the idea of the “overlapping, multifaceted intermingling of sounds and movements” (Stepputat 2016) common among anthropologists (Eisenlohr 2018). Depending on the physical and social space-time contexts that characterise different Prague *milongas* in different cycles of local tango life, I identify five soundscapes of Prague tango. I propose to briefly discuss the first four of these before turning to the fifth, which I call “the effects of war”.

Prague *Milongas* before 24 February 2022

If you attend regular Prague *milongas* for a while, you’ll notice that although their stylistics and membership may vary, they all proceed at a rather similar

³ I have attended approximately over 70 *milongas* in Prague.

leisurely rhythm. The couples move evenly in a circle, and as the local *tangueras* and *tangeros* complain, “nothing special happens here”. On the other hand, such *milongas* help their participants take a break from the rhythms of the reality of “late modernity” (Bauman 2013; Giddens 1990). I describe them as a soundscape of “ponds”, referring to C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), where the characters dive into different ponds and find themselves in different worlds.⁴ The participants in such “chamber” dance meetings are reviving the more than century-old practice of creating the special circumstances of the *milonga* (Savigliano 2000) and contributing to the current translocal tango scene through their unhurriedness and their longing for some kind of special experience (larger *milongas*, new partners, etc). Prague *milongas* – which, again, I call “ponds” – take place every week. The music played there can be prepared in advance as a playlist of tunes arranged in a certain sequence (Gotlib 2024).

Within the soundscape of “events”, I consider larger *milongas* which take place sporadically – their festive atmosphere cannot be predicted in advance. This soundscape revives the carnival component of tango culture (Miller 2014: 10) with numerous improvised dance narratives, and it gathers *tangueras* and *tangeros* from all over the world, including those from Prague who rarely attend regular local *milongas*. The DJ constantly changes his playlist, carefully monitoring the events on the dance floor and “reading” the overall atmosphere of the room. The reasons for the relevance of a big *milonga* or event can be: 1) its coincidence with an important date, the arrival of maestros, or the performance of an orchestra; 2) successful organisation: a creative idea of the organisers (in the case of a themed *milonga* carnival), a good choice of place and time, or well-written announcements (Gotlib 2024).

The soundscape of the “summer tango” continues the tradition of outdoor tango (Savigliano 1995: 177–179), occupying beautiful locations in Prague and presenting social tango to curious city-dwellers. A characteristic feature of this soundscape is its ability to fit into and/or transform the urban landscape. Summer *milongas* are characterised by their accessibility and openness to the outside world. They are often combined with a picnic: *tangueras* and *tangeros* bring tea in thermoses, wine, and snacks. Admission is usually free (Gotlib 2024).

Finally, the way local *milongas* are held is affected by the external circumstances or events experienced by the city. This happened in the “secret”

⁴ Ed. Note: See Lewis, C. S. *The Magician’s Nephew*. London: The Bodley Head, 1955.

milongas that took place in the homes of some local *tangueras* and *tangueros* during the strictest quarantine restrictions (associated with the spread of Covid-19) in 2020 and 2021 (Gotlib 2024). Within the soundscape of this “forbidden tango”, the couples moved self-consciously to lyrical, old-fashioned melodies, in a sense saying with their movements: “We don’t want to listen to government exhortations anymore – we want to listen to tango music!” This recalled a tragic period in Argentine history when, among other repressions, tango was banned (Cara 2009), as well as the protest component of the Creole culture from which this dance emerged (ibid.). My further discussion of the soundscape of “the effects of war” will be interspersed with excerpts from my ethnographic notes on these “wartime *milongas*”.

The Soundscape of the Effects of War

The soundscape of “the effects of war” is not tied to any season or time of year. Unlike the quarantine declared in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was only in place for a limited period and is now considered a thing of the past, contemporary Russian aggression does not yet have an end date. The *milongas* characteristic of the soundscape of “the effects of war”, which were organised in support of Ukraine, rather soon stopped being prominent among the other events of the Prague tango. This makes the *milonga* I describe below all the more remarkable – it has the sharpness and spontaneity of a first reaction to tragic news from Ukraine.⁵

The Moment of Silence

Spring is just approaching, and the war in Ukraine is already in full swing. On 27 February 2022, between a fountain and a colonnade framing man-made caves, several couples are dancing on the sun-drenched tiles. They dance tango silently and thoughtfully. Tango music is played from a small sound system; next to one of the columns there are several thermoses and plastic cups. Tea is drunk by those who are not dancing now, at 14:30 about a dozen of them – around the same number as the figures moving to the beat along the ellipse of this impromptu dance floor.

⁵ Another example of an open demonstration of civic solidarity involving *tangueras* and *tangueros* can be found in a paper on Turkish protests against violence and the denial of rights to LGBT communities (Heinz 2016).

As payment for participating in the Grotto milonga, Ondřej – an organiser of the first milonga to be held in Prague in support of Ukraine – has asked everyone in attendance to send money to support Ukraine.

A truly visible and symbolic scene, linked to the tragic events in Ukraine, takes place at the end of this milonga.

As the last tune plays, Ondřej dances with Evgenia, a tall Ukrainian woman wearing a bright yellow scarf, a yellow sweater, and blue pants. They stand out among the rest of the couples due to the swiftness of their movements and the expressiveness of their poses. The melody ends, the couples move to the edge of the rectangular area tiled with geometric shapes. Ondřej and Evgenia remain standing in an embrace exactly in the middle of the space that just served as a dance floor for everyone. Beautiful female voices begin to sound from the audio system – they sing in Ukrainian, in a folk style. Everyone looks silently upon the couple frozen in the tango embrace. Then John comes out and hugs Ondřej and the Ukrainian woman from the side; all the rest follow his example one by one (at that time, about 16 of us were left). Soon, the tangle of rallied bodies forms one big embrace.

In this act of solidarity, there was hardly anything joyful. We did not at all want to shout: “Together we are strong!” Rather, it was like a moment of silence for those who had already died and those who would die in the near future. I can’t be certain what all the *milonga* participants were really being silent about, but their silence “sounded” like a pacifist statement, formulated spontaneously and shared.

Solidarity

In the first days of the war, during their friendly (not necessarily tango-related) meetings, Prague *tangueras* and *tangueros* actively expressed their support for the Ukrainian members of the local community. In addition, during the first weeks of the war, several new Ukrainians – more than five actively dancing women and at least one man (also an experienced *tanguero*) – appeared at the Prague *milongas*. Two of the women and the man had come from Moscow, where they had lived for several years, but where they were not ready to stay after the start of the Russian aggression. Others arrived from different parts of Ukraine. As far as I know, all of these dancers easily adapted to the Prague

tango community. I saw them speaking with their new acquaintances in English, gathering into separate groups to talk in Russian or Ukrainian, and dancing with local tango dancers. Already in April, the woman whose Facebook post is cited at the end of this paper started teaching in the Caminito, one of the largest tango schools in Prague. Another refugee from Ukraine is a rather famous DJ and photographer within the international tango community; she has already played music at several Prague *milongas* and taken photographic portraits of local dancers.

In some cases, it was even hard for me to identify these new members of the Prague tango community. At the beginning of April, I invited Olga from Odessa to dance for the first time.⁶ We danced in silence. She carried herself confidently, as if she had already been to the Prague *milongas* many times, and I thought she was one of the local *tangueras* with whom, for some reason, I had not yet crossed paths. Olga would tell me later that she had never been to Prague before. The IT company she works for offered to move her to the Czech capital one month after the start of the war.

One perspective from which the *milongas* in Prague after 24 February 2022 can be considered is that of solidarity. Most *milonga* organisers spoke in support of Ukraine. Many *milongas* featured the blue and yellow flag of Ukraine and donation boxes to raise funds to aid people affected by the war. As early as 6 March, a *milonga* organised by Caminito raised 17,140 Czech crowns in donations. As I know from Ondřej,⁷ who often visits tango festivals and marathons around Europe, the fact that Russian and Ukrainian *tangueras* and *tangueros* dance and chat together at the Prague *milongas* is not something that works in other tango communities. One can find many discussions on Facebook where Ukrainian dancers explain that they will not dance with Russians, or that Russians will not be allowed into marathons unless they openly declare that they oppose the war.⁸

I did not hear about such reactions against Russians in the Prague tango community, although many members are from Russia. However, there has been a rather strong reaction to another issue. One organiser of a big *milonga*

⁶ Her name is changed here for privacy reasons.

⁷ It was an informal dialogue. In my study I did not conduct more formally framed and partially structured interviews.

⁸ Here you have a typical example of this phenomenon: www.facebook.com/search/posts/?q=tango%20festival%20without%20Russians.

decorated with Ukrainian flags said during her opening speech: “And of course our hearts belong to the Ukrainians! Glory to Ukraine!” The fact that no fundraising efforts in support of Ukrainians were organised at this crowded *milonga* provoked serious discussion on Facebook. As a result, on 14 April, “The Great Blue-Yellow Charity Milonga” took place, managing to collect 37,350 Czech crowns (approx. €1,500 or \$1,800 USD) for Ukrainian needs.⁹

By May and June 2022, the war had become almost a familiar backdrop; the difference between the *tangueras* who came from Ukraine after the start of the Russian aggression and the people from Ukraine who had been visiting the Prague *milongas* before then was no longer obvious. At the weekly *Bailemos milonga*, the oldest of the regular Prague *milongas*, the large Ukrainian flag became a permanent element of the interior design. Since the end of April 2022, representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora – the aforementioned man who, in tandem with a *tanguera*, has long been part of the local tango community – have been holding a new Rest.Art milonga in a small bar located in the Prague municipal district of Podolí. It features a narrow, oblong, wooden dance floor, subdued lighting, and a dozen dancing couples. By the end of June 2022, it was already a regular milonga where various dancers come to give the cramped space of the bar the mysterious charm of tango.

By mid-summer, the effects of the war in Ukraine seemed to have flattened, but some of the changes they caused had managed to take root in the Prague tango community. Ukrainian women and men continue to dance tango in Prague in an extended group, and the rest of the local *milonga* participants continue to be interested in what is happening in Ukraine. Russians and Belarusians also continue to visit the Prague *milongas* and to dance with Ukrainians as well. Apart from the *milongas*, *tangueras* from Ukraine continue to maintain good relations with the people of Prague, including those originally from Russia.¹⁰ No one in the local community, for example, finds it strange when a Ukrainian woman who left her home because of Russian bombs prepares *borscht*, the national dish of her country, for her Russian friends.

⁹ To tell the truth, such actions of support have not reached the scale of some other tango communities. For instance, my German-speaking acquaintances told me about a big tango studio in Berlin that closed down to become an assistance center for Ukrainian refugees.

¹⁰ Only one *tanguera* from Russia shared with me the impression that some *tangueras* from Ukraine do not want to say “hello” to her.

Speaking of my own experience of visiting the Prague *milongas* in the first six months of the war,¹¹ I have always disagreed with Putin's politics; that was one of the main reasons why I left Russia almost seven years ago with my wife and our children. As a psychologist, I have provided a number of free consultations to Ukrainian refugees. However, I didn't have to declare all this at the Prague *milongas*. Furthermore, I was even asked more than once if everything was all right with me, if I was experiencing any harassment in the Czech Republic because of my Russian passport.

From the beginning of the war until the autumn of 2023, many *milongas* were held with proceeds going "in support of Ukraine", or at least declaring "support for Ukraine". These *milongas* run almost like any other, differing mainly in that the proceeds from the entrance fee go, for example, to humanitarian aid for the needs of Ukrainians who are now in occupied territory. I have heard from Prague *tangueras* and *tangueros* of various nationalities that, when "things like the war in Ukraine" are happening, the possibility of sharing their feelings through dance becomes very important to them. Support for Ukraine is therefore not something that is often talked about in Prague tango; solidarity towards Ukrainians has not taken on an obsessive character. Perhaps that is why the Ukrainians usually feel comfortable at these local *milongas*.

Sad Thoughts

The *tangueras* from Ukraine are grateful to the Prague tango community for allowing them to take their minds off the bad news from home by attending the local *milongas*. However, during the first months of the war, I noticed more than once how one of the Ukrainian women, after happily dancing or talking with someone, would sit down, pick up her smartphone, and begin to scroll through the screen, concentrating gloomily on certain information. That also reminded me that something terrible was happening nearby, and I was not the only one among the non-Ukrainian Prague *tangueros* and *tangueras* who was sensitive to these "echoes of war".

All through March and all through April, at every *milonga*, there was talk of the war. I participated in several conversations in which the tragic events evoked by the Russian aggression were discussed directly. For instance, a *tanguera* from

¹¹ I was at dozen milongas during this period. The frequency of these events has not significantly changed since the outbreak of the war.

Ukraine was asked what was happening to her loved ones. “My brothers are with the machine guns, my other relatives are in bomb shelters” – her answer is imprinted in my memory. Some other conversations may not have seemed very clear to those who were not in the loop: “I don’t even know what to say”, “Yeah, it’s awful”, “When will this stop already?” Such fragmentary dialogues were then followed by dancing that might have been similar (in character) to the following dance narrative, which I observed in the spring of 2022 at a crowded *milonga* in the spacious hall of the Caminito tango school:

Old acquaintances: He is Russian from Omsk, supporting Ukraine in the current war; she is Ukrainian, forced to move to Prague in a hurry. Both dance in their own individual manner. She moves dynamically, making the most of the energy received from the interaction with a partner. At the same time, her movements are precise and elegant; at first glance she dances as if a ballerina had descended from the stage into the auditorium and agreed to dance with a spectator. However, her beautiful black dress with its cutout back and her impressive mastery of dance technique are deceptive – the external effect is not a priority in this case. The young woman’s eyes are closed; she is completely immersed in the dance dialogue, and her every movement testifies to her sensitive reaction to the partner’s choreographic idea and his interpretation of the melody resounding from the loudspeakers.

A thoughtful, sad melody plays, accompanied by thick, tragic vocals. He, too, is entirely in black, with his shirt, trousers, and shoes all in the same tone. His body, not counting the slightly bent knees, is directed entirely upwards. His head is tilted to the left so his partner’s forehead can rest comfortably against his cheek. His right arm embraces her bare back at the area of the shoulder blades, while his left palm squeezes the partner’s palm at the level of her shoulders. Together, his arms form a soft, stable frame. His whole being is turned toward the woman who has agreed to become his interlocutor for these four melodies. He listens and speaks at the same time. Small steps alternate with large ones; several times, after turns, he chooses diagonal directions. At these moments, the couple moves neither forward, nor backwards, nor laterally, but cuts through the space, as it were, risking collision with neighbouring pairs. However, collisions do not occur: While they stand out in the stream of couples moving in a circle, they do not disturb their movement.

The silent dialogue of this pair is in tune with the music. When the melody breaks off, they stop without completing the step – in their movements, clearly defined and at the same time unhurried, there are more questions than answers. I notice again that their immersion in the dance interaction does not prevent them

from moving around the dance floor, which is filled with couples. Rather, they interact not just with each other, but also with the rest of the dance floor, which is moving like one big organism. Yet their story differs from the stories being told by the other couples in what I would call its ‘resounding silence’. The two of them are being silent about something.

“Listening to silence” is an important component of a *tanguera*’s or *tanguero*’s musicality. The legendary tango maestro Gavito told us: “I dance the silence. I dance what comes before the music and what comes after... what I dance is like an intention” (Plazaola 2014, 173).¹² In this context, the above description could be considered typical of the contemporary translocal tango scene. On the other hand, together with the above-mentioned conversations, such dancing gave the *milongas* held in the first months of 2022 both a sorrowful, wartime tinge and emphasised another characteristic aspect of tango culture.

With the popularisation of the *bandoneón*,¹³ lyrical sophistication, and the rise of the Carlos Gardel cult in the 1920s, tango melodies acquired a nostalgic sound (Conde 2004; Azzi–Goertzen 1999). As “a sad thought that can be danced” (Discépolo 1977), tango has a rich tradition of the dance reflecting on tragic events. For instance, in the depressing period of the Dirty War (1976–1983) (Taylor 1998), Argentinian *milongueras* and *milongueros* interpreted in dance the lyric melodies of Carlos di Sarli and Francisco Canaro, the broken rhythms of Juan D’Arienzo, and the dramatic tunes of Osvaldo Pugliese and Miguel Caló, all of which resound at *milongas* in Prague today. These melodies might have played a special role for those who experienced the outbreak of war in Ukraine. As one Prague *tanguero* with whom I discussed the war said, “Tango music helps a lot, it has everything in it.”

Lastly, I would like to give one more example to illustrate what kind of “sad thoughts” can be danced and discussed during the Prague *milongas* in wartime. The previously mentioned Odessan woman, Olga, is grateful to the people of Prague in general and to the local tango community in particular for their hospitality and sympathetic attitude towards her. At the same time, she notices that “everything in the Prague tango is somehow calmer”. She and I fell

¹² In terms of ethnomusicology, ‘listening to silence’ appears to be relevant both to the soundscape of the effect of war discussed here (Wood 2021) and to various soundscapes described by other authors (Jurková 2014: 135–140).

¹³ *Bandoneón* is a type of concert accordion of German origin.

into talking while sitting near a dance floor crowded with dancing couples.¹⁴ That evening in the bar where the *milonga* was held, it was especially lively and noisy, which seemed to contradict Olga's thesis about the "calmness" of Prague tango. "Look," she continued with a bitter smile. "There are so many people on the dance floor, and no one bumps into anyone... If we had such a *milonga* in Odessa, everyone would have pushed into each other a long time ago." It was hard not to hear a note of nostalgia in that last phrase.

Bombs and roses

I believe that what happened after 24 February 2022 was a continuation of the tradition of solidarity that was evident in the Prague tango community during the lockdown of 2020-2021. The "secret" *milongas* of that time served to preserve local tango as an active social practice. A notable change in Prague tango life brought about by wartime is the emergence of *milongas* held in support of Ukraine. Another change, not so noticeable, is related to certain scenes that could be characterised as ceremonial, but which have not yet shaped up into a new ritual. Although these scenes probably remain in the memory of only a few Prague *tangueras* and *tangueros*, I believe they are of sufficient value to be mentioned.

We have already discussed one such episode connected with the tragic events in Ukraine: the moment of silence that took place at the first wartime *milonga* in Prague on 27 February 2022. A second episode that probably falls under the same title was a typical situation where the subject of the war had a certain effect, although the word "war" was never spoken at all. It took place on 19 March 2022 at the *milonga* in the Water Tower. I invited a Russian-speaking *tanguera* unfamiliar to me to dance. In between melodies, I asked her if she was from Russia; I asked my question affirmatively because, for some reason, I was sure that she was. The girl replied: "No, I'm from Ukraine. And you?" Here she apparently read the embarrassment on my face and, without waiting for an answer, she said: "From Russia? Well, let's hug!" A little later on, she said, "What else should we do? This is the least we can do."

I would like to place her rhetorical question from this last scene (which was posed after a silent embrace) in dialogical relation with the following text posted on Facebook on 26 June 2022 by another *tanguera* from Ukraine:

¹⁴ 2 April at the Cortina *milonga*.

In my world, forgetting about the war is impossible. Every day, I read disturbing news before and after writing my thesis or teaching classes, although I don't write about it much. I remember it always.

Today, Kyiv was bombed again. The city where more and more of my friends are coming back, and where my nephew is. And just after that, I had a conversation where I was told that it is not as bad as it was.

A large beautiful European country is being terrorised for the 5th month in front of everyone's eyes – IT IS as bad as it was, and it is getting worse. Please, don't let the war become routine. It is closer than it seems.

Today, Kyiv was bombed again. Roses in Prague are blooming. Dozens of innocent people die every day. Tonight I am going to a *milonga*. I have no idea how to fit all these things into one small me at the same time.¹⁵

Beneath this post, I found the “likes” and emojis from many Prague *tangueras* and *tangueros*, which once again confirmed that they were not indifferent to what was happening in Ukraine during the first months of the war. Although this text does not contain a question mark, it does pose a rhetorical question. Hence, we have two rhetorical questions from two different Ukrainian women appearing on the Prague tango scene after the start of Russian aggression. The first is: “What else can we do?” And the second: “How to fit all this into myself?” One of the powerful answers to these questions is the embrace, the central ritual of the translocal tango phenomenon. *Tangueras* and *tangueros* from different communities share the idea of embracing as a way to experience together the emotions evoked by tango music (Cara 2009; Petridou 2009). Since I have heard from many participants of Prague's *milongas* that they use the embrace as a means of communication, the current war in Ukraine may have rearticulated this idea for some of them.

Conclusion

Wherein lies the soundscape of “the effect of war”? At the beginning of this article, I listed the questions that guide my ethnographic research. The first two are: “Which elements of the translocal phenomenon of tango are the participants of the observed *milonga* reviving?” and “In what form and through what ritual are these elements reproduced?”. In the context of the war in Ukraine,

¹⁵ The spelling and punctuation here are in accordance with the original text.

contemporary Prague *tangueras* and *tangueros* are reviving both the tango as “a sad thought that can be danced” and the local traditions of solidarity formed in the previous years of Prague tango life, with their low-key expressions of solidarity and thoughtful dancing to old tunes. At the same time, the Prague *milongas* in support of Ukraine can be seen as a ritual that has become habitual for the local tango community. It is more complicated to find an answer to the third question: “What values or feelings do these elements of dance reflection and solidarity express at such *milongas*?”

Let me quote another excerpt from my ethnographic notes. Since the *milongas* held by Ondřej in support of Ukraine have already become a tradition, I came again to the Grotto on a warm June evening.

A cheerful group of four Ukrainian women sits on the parapet, drinking the champagne they brought with them. From time to time, other members of the milonga join them, and every three or four tunes, one of them is invited to dance. At some point, Ondřej asks DJ Harry to stop the music and thanks everyone present for their donations – the money raised that evening will be used to support Ukrainians affected by the war. Applause. Harry turns the music back on. However, it takes a few minutes before the dance floor fills up again. The guests of the milonga probably knew from the announcement what the milonga donations would be used for, but they seem to need time to reflect on the information they have heard (despite the tactfulness of Ondřej’s short speech).

Such scenes, which I have called the “echoes of war”,¹⁶ might have made it problematic for some compassionate *tangueras* and *tangueros* to fully immerse themselves in what was happening in the *milonga*. Against the backdrop of the harsh realities of the war in an (almost) neighbouring country, part of the Prague tango community faces the transience of the tango experience itself and the questions which, while they cannot be answered, probably serve as one of the reasons why *milongas* in support of Ukraine continue to take place in the Czech capital. “The effects of war” soundscape thus creates additional conditions for embodying the shades of melancholy intrinsic to the tango in contemporary Prague *milongas*.

¹⁶ Maybe I should have called them ‘echoes of wartime’, this can be discussed.

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