

Review: *Reclaiming the Personal: Oral History in Post-Socialist Europe.*

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Natalia Khanenko-Friesen and Gelinada Grinchenko, eds. *Reclaiming the Personal: Oral History in Post-Socialist Europe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 328 pages. ISBN 9781442637382

This book is a collection of essays on the experiences of Eastern European and Soviet socialist subjects, repressed and marginalized by the political agendas and meta-narratives of the socialist states. The works share rich interviews with former forced laborers, female intelligentsia, collective farmers and rural residents, and members of political and religious groups opposing state socialism. The book has four parts demonstrating: (I) the promise of oral history in the post-socialist context, (II) the tensions between individual and collective memory, (III) experiences of the Second World War and its aftermath, and (IV) memories of late socialism.

In Part I, Alexander von Plato summarizes the rise of oral history research in Germany. He argues that oral history research can bring to light social tensions and public sentiments omitted in authoritarian governments' meta-narratives (Chapter 1). Looking at the elite change in Germany, first, after the Nazi regime, and then, again after the fall of the Berlin Wall, von Plato lucidly shows how oral history can supplement quantitative biographical research and bring to light the mindsets and attitudes of elite and marginalized groups alike during periods of social change. Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk (Chapter 2) illustrates how survivors of communist persecution in Poland now use publicized socialist secret police records to reconstruct their victim/hero identities in the context of post-socialist politics and material compensation to communism resisters. Alexey Golubev's work (Chapter 3) reveals how memories of Finnish occupation of Soviet Karelia between 1941-1944 differ along ethnic lines. The memory difference is rooted in social history: during the occupation, the Finnish authorities treated the ethnically related Finno-Ugric population of Karelia better, aiming "to turn them into loyal Finnish subjects" (p.60), and planning to cleanse Karelia from 'non-nationals', such as ethnic Russians. These different experiences of the occupation, suppressed under the Cold War politics, surfaced in the post-Soviet period in an information war over the collective memory of the Finnish occupation. Golubev examines the process and outcome of this struggle. A specific strength of Part 1

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is that all three essays firmly connect their qualitative data and the larger historical socio-economic context, without conceptually overpowering one at the expense of another.

In Part II, Yelena Rozhdestvenskaya (Chapter 4) places her interviews with Russian forced laborers during the Nazi occupation in an interpretive theoretical context. Rozhdestvenskaya describes common characteristics of the individual narratives, including many narrators' inability to integrate their pre-war experiences with their post-war lives. (In addition to the trauma of their experience in Nazi forced labor camps, these narrators were subjected to heavy stigma in the Soviet society after the War.) In Chapter 5, Natalia Pushkareva explores the career and life balance of female academicians in Russia and Belarus. She shows that behind the academic success of her respondents was strong support of parents. By contrast, such success was a challenge to the relationship with husbands. Rozalia Cherepanova's essay (Chapter 6) looks at the diverse experiences shared in 132 interviews conducted in post-Soviet Russia: being a child of parents exiled to Gulag camps, feeling like an outsider in socialist society, experiencing social success and unfulfilled ambitions in the USSR, and traveling outside of the country. Cherepanova opens her essay with a discussion of the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting and analyzing oral history research, and uses her qualitative data as a ground for addressing these. Yet, her treatment of these challenges, a psychoanalytic dissection and categorization of personal narratives—shared in moments of trust, as a contribution to historical research—as “Cinderella” or “Oedipus” stories deeply troubled this reviewer. Would the respondents have shared their life stories with the same trust, had they been informed about how their narratives would be subject to psychoanalytic labelling?

Part III opens with Marta Kurkowska-Budzan's essay on how past veterans and civilians remember the anti-communist armed underground, specifically the partisan movement against the communists in Poland between 1945-1957 (Chapter 7). The author shows that the current “mythologizing” of the anti-communist movement is not supported by the civilians' memories in her study site, Bialystok region. Her oral historical work reveals that the civilians experienced high-handedness and arbitrary pillage from partisans, and feared them as well as the socialist government. Gelinada Grinchenko's (Chapter 8) work represents in-depth interviews with two Ukrainian former child Ostarbeiters—forced laborers in Nazi Germany. Her interviews provide a rich description of the Ostarbeiters' life in Nazi forced labor camps. (Rozhdestvenskaya's essay on the same topic in this volume focuses more on the analysis of narrative strategies used by former forced laborers during the interviews.)

The last three essays, contained in Part IV, focus on the experiences of late socialism. David Curp argues that religiosity and the institutions of Catholic Sara Rzayeva, “Review of *Reclaiming the Personal: Oral History in Post-Socialist Europe*.” *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017).

Church played a fundamental political role in both the fall of state-socialism and the rise of the solidarity feeling of Poles as one community based on shared beliefs (Chapter 9). Natalia Khanenko-Friesen's essay is on the memories of land decollectivization in rural Ukraine through interviews with the former collective farmers who came of age after the Second World War (Chapter 10). In the book's final chapter, Makhovskaya and Romanova take a close look at how people in Belarusian provinces responded to the collapse of the Soviet Union, independence, shortages of consumer goods, Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaigns, and losing life savings, as well as to the unifying meta-narrative of the Soviet 'fraternity'.

The preparation of this volume at this time is commendable. The topics discussed in the book had not been formally documented by the socialist governments: they were deliberately omitted and repressed in the name of official ideology. Collecting accounts of these events through oral history research across the former Socialist space now, while social scientists still have access to live witnesses and victims, is important. Yet, this is not the sole aim of the volume. According to the editors' 'Introduction' to the volume, oral history in the post-socialist context is not just about filling in the parts left blank by Soviet/socialist historiography. This oral history is simultaneously expanding pluralization, replacing class and collectivist stances on history, and legitimizing new agents of national histories. The editors explicitly present the volume as a political project. It is this reviewer's opinion that the editors' claim misrepresents the work collected in the volume. The volume does not present the individual as an independent maker of history obscured in the past by the collectivist discourse of the socialist period. Rather, most essays in the volume show how individual, personal experiences and their recollections are shaped by the socio-economic and political context, both in socialist and post-socialist periods. The authors carefully show how specificities of the post-socialist context, such as the official or community stance on the victims and villains of the past, or availability of payments to the socialism victims, affect selective remembrance and narrative strategies during the interviews.

The volume is an excellent collection of how different researchers address bias in oral history research. Many authors in the volume address these limitations of the oral history research by explaining in detail the historical political, socio-economic, and specific local context in which the respondents remember their past. They also note and question any discrepancies in the narratives. This gives the reader a richer, deeper view of the collected material. Other works in the volume use psychoanalytic interpretation and categorization of the narratives to address selective remembering, exaggeration, and creativity in the respondents' stories. As noted in the discussion of Cherepanova's essay above, this approach can create more ethical problems than it solves. One author, Alexander von Plato, suggests combining oral history research with quantitative

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data, and demonstrates very insightful findings from such mixed research in Germany. Von Plato's research points out another limitation of oral history research—the viewpoints of a population in a given period comprise very delicate data, susceptible to rapid change. The key to successful use of such data lies in recognizing its historical nature, and combining it, when possible, with other forms of data.

In sum, this volume is an excellent source of qualitative data on “less-talked-about” experiences of socialism, and an interesting exposition of case studies addressing narrator bias in oral history research. However, because the book does not reconceptualize the past based on individual, personal experiences as claimed in its introduction, the name of the volume, “Reclaiming the personal”, is somewhat misleading.