

Mark, James: *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*. London: Yale University Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-300-16716-0; 312 S.

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It has to be asserted at the beginning that James Mark's „The Unfinished Revolution“, is an invaluable contribution to the field of memory studies and it will remain one of the key reference works on the subject of memory and representations of Communism in Central-Eastern Europe for years to come. The book is the first attempt to provide a comparative assessment of the way the Communist past has been tackled by post-Communist political elites in the region and it is one of the first ones that try to combine the field of memory studies with the methods and concerns of oral history. Although the concept of ‘memory’ has assumed significant authority in the last few decades, there have been no systematic attempts to compare the way individual memories of the past echo the grand narratives of collective memory.

The book focuses on the upsurge of diverse memory practices in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 (Russia, as a somewhat peculiar case, is excluded from this framework). In terms of intensity, diversity and scale, these memory practices are somewhat unique in modern European history. As the author points out, the collapse of dictatorial regimes in Spain, Portugal, and Greece, and even the downfall of Nazi Germany were not followed by such a tsunami of diverse memory practices as the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The struggle for dominating the collective memory of the past manifested itself in the establishment of history commissions, the construction of museums and other sites of memory, and the organisation of commemorations, resulting in a gradual intensification of memory politics in the 1990s in the respective countries, and leading to quasi-memory wars in some cases. One is certainly tempted to ask the question: Why is memory so important in East Central Europe, and why the

memory of Communism?

Although the book does not make an attempt to answer this particular question and it does not address the significance of memory cultures in Central and Eastern Europe from a historical perspective, it does make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the complexities of memory practices in a post-Communist context. It rightly points out, for example, that the escalation of „memory wars“ in post-Communist countries had more to do with the present than with the past and/or with local traditions of commemoration. Mark argues emphatically that memory practices in relation to the Communist past are entangled in the web of contemporary political relations and are thus defined by changing political agendas. The political dimension of memory is encapsulated by the expression „unfinished revolution“, which has gained – and is still gaining – significant currency in post-Communist regimes in the region.

Mark argues throughout the book that frustrations about the unfulfilled promises of the „revolutions of 1989“ gradually led to the emergence of the idea of an „unfinished revolution“ in the respective countries. The idea – most often advocated by radical anti-Communists and the conservative right – refers to the perception of 1989 as an incomplete revolution and includes references to the continuing political and economic role of former members of the Communist Party. Thus, the memory of Communism has been instrumentalised in political battles against ex-Communists and it is rarely evoked to commemorate the victory of democratic values in 1989.

The theme of the „unfinished revolution“ runs through the book and it links the different chapters. The book can be divided into two major parts: chapters 2 to 4 provide an overview of how certain post-Communist countries have tried to grapple with the heritage of Communism and how they tried to shape the memory of the past in order to „complete“ the revolution of 1989, whilst chapters 5 to 7 discuss the way these new narratives have been internalised by certain segments of the population and how „memory wars“ influenced the shaping of new identities after 1989.

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Chapter 2 focuses on (politicised) academic attempts to create new historical master narratives of the past in Romania and in Poland. Mark rightly points out that history commissions and institutes of memory that were set up to re-evaluate the past with the help of archival materials adopted a liberal stance towards Communism. They nonetheless contributed to the maintenance of bipolar identity constructs by focusing almost exclusively on „victims“ and „perpetrators“. Leaving narratives behind, chapters 3 and 4 analyse the role of sites of memory (terror sites, museums, statue parks, occupation museums) in constructing the idea of „unfinished revolution“. As Mark convincingly argues, such museums and sites (Grūtas Park in Lithuania, Szoborpark and House of Terror in Budapest, Sighet prison in Romania, and occupation museums in Riga and Tallin) were mainly constructed to criminalize the Communist regime on the one hand, and to create an „imagined community of a nation of victims“ on the other. These chapters also analyse the conscious manipulation of the past at those sites emphasising the tendency to downplay the significance of Nazi crimes and to emphasise the victimisation of the nation under Communist terror.

The second thematic part of the book relies primarily on oral history interviews and aims to reveal how the creation of new historical master narratives influenced the shaping of memories about the Communist past at the level of the individual in the respective societies. James Mark makes clear that the Communist-era practice of writing autobiographies continued to influence the way individuals portrayed themselves after 1989, which is reflected in the tendency to align personal life-stories to (politicised) official narratives about the past. Memories about rape or stories about victimisation often evoke official narratives about the victimisation of the nation, whereas the trope of anti-Fascism was recycled to validate one's leftist political inclinations after 1989. Although the interviews were meant to provide a contrast to official narratives that tend to ignore the multiplicity of individual memories about Communism, the tendency in the book to label them with schematic categories (anti-Communist

life story, anti-anti-Communist life story, etc.) creates an equally one-dimensional image of memory practices. The argument that individuals tend to write themselves into official narratives and assume an identity – mostly that of the victim – created by those narratives is certainly a compelling one. In fact, it is one of the most important findings in the book. However, the suggestion that there are only two versions of the past – right or left wing – seems somewhat unconvincing and the selected quotations do not provide a solid empirical thrust to that claim either. One should also add that the concept of memory fades away a little in the chapters using oral history interviews, and the volume generally makes no real attempt to engage critically with memory studies on a theoretical level, even if the extremely rich and diverse empirical material used certainly would have provided a solid ground for that. Furthermore, the conceptual framework of the discussion deserved further clarification. 'Historical narrative' and 'memory' are used interchangeably and there is no willingness in the book to differentiate between these two concepts.

In any case, „The Unfinished Revolution“ remains a highly original work and a truly groundbreaking contribution to the field of memory studies in East Central Europe. The book would certainly feature the reading lists of university courses, and one could only wish that it would eventually land on the desks of intellectuals and civil servants engaged on the battlefronts of memory wars as well.

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