

Between Divergent Narratives and National Loyalties: Oral History and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe

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The conference discussed different methodological approaches as well as specific projects concerning oral history in East Central Europe. In his welcome address and introduction PETER HASLINGER (Marburg) emphasized, that the importance of oral history becomes particularly clear in this region, where several time periods and topics are recently being reevaluated. Moreover, oral history also plays a role in politics of memory and the construction of national identities. The main goal of oral history is letting different voices be heard. However, tendencies of victimization in the West often face hero narratives and national assertiveness in the East. Nevertheless, these tendencies are challenged by contemporary projects that try to create a more diverse culture of memory and pluralize the historic discourse.

The first panel 'Contemporary Testimonies in Current Theatre and Art' was opened by POLINA BORODINA (Moscow), who presented the verbatim method used in the documentary theatre as an 'alternative approach to the history of contemporary Russia'. She illustrated different ways of using interviews in theatre productions by either embedding the interview within the artistic construction or in a more objective approach recreating what happened or performing the interview dialogue. Secondly, DARYA TSYMBALYUK (Bergamo) depicted her art project about internally displaced people from Donbas in Ukraine. She used emotional maps in combination with interviews to show how displacement impacts the memory of cities. Moreover, she noticed that the role of stereotypes and the fear of victimization are not to be underestimated in the course of oral history projects. Emotional maps help to avoid these fears and

moreover provoke dialogue and discussion within society. In the discussion, the participants stated, that there is currently a general shift from interviewing people at the margin of society to interviewing 'ordinary people' and possibly a shift from competing narratives to polyphony.

In the second panel 'The Challenges of Establishment of Oral History' AGNÈS ARP (Jena) outlined her oral history project which she conducted together with university students interviewing different types of people on how they experienced the revolution in the GDR. It seems as if the memory of these people is more diverse than the general, West-German dominated discourse, which condemns the GDR as rogue regime. The interviewees experienced the breakdown as shocking and have both critical and nostalgic feelings towards the GDR. After the German unification, they perceived both new possibilities but also new disappointments. In the second contribution, IRYNA KASHTALIAN (Minsk) contrasted 'Oral History vs. Official Politics of Memory' concerning Stalinism in Belarus: For example, the repressions in the Stalin era are a taboo in the official politics of memory, but play an important role in the memory of individuals. She noticed differences between the East and the West of Belarus and that people generally still suffer from the traumatic experience and often fear repressions. Oral history researchers in Belarus face several challenges, like the impact of political factors on their research, the slow changes since the Soviet period and the considerable time expense needed in order to conduct their research. Subsequently, NATALIA TIMOFEEVA (Voronezh) argued, that oral history and the official politics of memory cannot be viewed black and white, as two opposing poles. Already in the time of the USSR, several oral history projects were carried out to make the interview partners present themselves as agents in history. However, they were often censored to fit into the prevailing hero narrative. Nowadays, many victims that used to be silent become active and want to tell their stories, because they feel that they have been excluded from the official narratives. These testimonies were collected in several regional or nationwide projects. In

the following discussion the emotional and moral interconnections of oral history were addressed as a central theme. Oral history gives a voice to those who suffered, but for the researcher it can be difficult to balance scientific research and sacralization. Additionally the question of 'political correctness of memory' is always relevant when it comes to people who narrate differently than the master narrative or people that adapted to it.

The third panel 'Post-Socialism and Economic Transformation' started with JOANNA WAWRZYŃIAK'S (Warsaw) talk about her project on memories of the economic transition from socialism to capitalism in Poland. She mainly interviewed employees of previously state-owned enterprises who experienced the 'shock-therapy' of privatization in the midlife of their career. The interviews painted a much more nuanced picture of the neoliberal changes than depicted in the general politics of memory in the 90s in Poland. They are not completely uncritical but different types of nostalgia set them apart from the official politics, which condemn socialism or want to forget about it. TILL HILMAR (New Haven) conducted a similar research in East Germany with two groups of interviewees in order to find out whether there are winners and losers of the transformation with different narratives and how subjective memory and collective remembrance interact. He noticed that most biographies focus on accounts of self-worth which arise from a fear of being devalued. Moreover, the regional identity of the interviewees seems to be very important, contrasting East-German skill with West-German pretentiousness. In addition to economic changes, the transformation also impacted the personal relationships in many cases. Many interviewees contrasted a social cohesion they experienced in socialism with a dog-eat-dog behavior in capitalism. ANSELMA GALLINAT (Newcastle) also spoke about 'Life Stories after a Fundamental Regime Change' in the GDR. Many interviewees do not feel represented by the official discourse on the GDR as a dictatorship with clearly distinguishable victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Some life stories, especially those of people who now work in memory politics of 'Aufarbeitung', seem to be

very coherent whereas others are non-linear narratives in the making. They are very ambiguous and struggle to understand both the past and their own position in the state. All of these examples show how oral history can depict personal life stories that diversify the discourse as they are more nuanced than the so called master-narrative of the economic transformation as liberation and the socialist times as rogue regime. However, they are also often subject to different kinds of nostalgia.

The fourth panel focused on 'Methodological Approaches'. VITALII OGIENKO (Kiev) started with presenting the 'Oral History Projects of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory and Politics of Memory'. He described two methodological approaches. On the one hand the instrumentalist approach, which political or cultural actors use with an specific agenda, often with the purpose to legitimize the state. On the other hand the constructivist approach where different groups negotiate. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory has used both methods during the time of its existence, depending on the specific project and on the institute's degree of institutional independence from government agency at that time. Next ULRIKE HUHNS (Bremen) presented her research on interview techniques in the late Soviet Union. In that time, the field was mostly regarded as a source for data and there was little dialogical interaction. The aim was to secure material and to interrogate information sources as exhaustively as possible. Oral history was used in the research of Ukrainian folklore, also with the double agenda to create new traditions and a new nation on the basis of this information. Nowadays many scholars retrospectively critically evaluate their research of that time and have chosen new topics that have formerly been marginalized, like e.g. the Chernobyl catastrophe. In the third contribution to this panel NATALIA OTRISHCHENKO (Lviv) stated that narratives are often about clearly defined heroes and victims because history is not only about justice but also about power. In her research on Euro-maidan she tries to trade the pattern of the researcher as an expert and the witness as 'source' in for a shared authority of knowledge production and interpretation which ac-

tively includes the public. Additionally, she remarks that when working with oral history one must be careful not to enhance existing stereotypes, especially when social engagement blurs the borders and roles of oral history.

The fifth and last panel thematized 'Post-Socialist Collectives of Memory' with MYKOLA BOROVYK (Munich) giving a paper on the Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War in memories of Ukrainian residents. He noticed that many memories have a common storyline of the good times before the war, the sudden invasion, the time of occupation, where many put an emphasis on resistance, the liberation and the following rebuilding of the country. Some topics, like the Ribbentrop-Molotov-Pact or the Holocaust are mostly left out of the story. From this he draws the conclusion that the personal narration often adapts to guidelines given by the common narrative of memory. However, he observed, that the reports also differ according to the language they are given in. Finishing the panel and the conference, NADEZHDA BELJAKOVA (Moscow) spoke about the memory of members of Free Churches and what difficulties she faced trying to interview them. They often distrust academic researchers or think that they have nothing interesting to tell. In many cases their personal experience does not fit the public narrative of the Soviet Union as hell for Free Churches. They often identified themselves with certain Soviet values and norms and have some kind of nostalgia for a time with a more black and white ideology. However, discrimination is always present in their narration as a latent, familiar background. The conference gave an insight on many individual perspectives on oral history, with distinct methodological approaches focusing on different regions and time periods with various thematic emphasis and distinct utilization of the interview material. In addition to the many highly interesting presentations the following discussions about methodological as well as moral questions concerning oral history, different narratives and how to deal with them, changes in oral history over the past years and the role of oral history in historiography, politics of memory and

society offered manifold thought-provoking impulse.

Conference Overview:

SECTION I: Contemporary Testimonies in Current Theatre and Art

Polina Borodina (Moscow): Documentary Theater: An Alternative History of Contemporary Russia

Darya Tsymbalyuk (Bergamo): Oral History and the Urgency of „Now“ : How to Ask without Hurting, how to Let Voices Speak in a Current Context?

Commentary: Anna Veronika Wendland (Marburg)

SECTION II: The Challenge of Establishment of Oral History

Agnès Arp (Jena): Oral-History-Projekt über die Erinnerungen an die Wende und die DDR
Iryna Kashtalian (Minsk): Study of Stalinism in Belarus: Oral History vs. Official Politics of Memory

Natalia Timofeewa (Woronezh): Oral History in Russland: Problemkreis und Ausblick auf die weitere Entwicklung

Commentary: Piotr Filipkowski (Jena)

SECTION III: Post-Socialism and Economic Transformation

Joanna Wawrzyniak (Warsaw): From 'Shock Therapy' to 'Negotiated Colonization': Work and Nostalgia in (Post-)Socialist Industry

Till Hilmar (New Haven): Nach dem Sozialismus: Kollektive Deutungen der ökonomischen Transformation ab 1989

Anselma Gallinat (Newcastle): Bildungsroman or Constructive Incoherence: Life Stories after Fundamental Regime Change

Commentary: Svetlana Boltovskaja (Marburg)

SECTION IV: Methodological Approaches

Vitalii Ogienko (Kiev): Oral History Projects of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory and Politics of Memory

Ulrike Huhn (Bremen): Von der Festforschung zum Holodomor. Aufbrüche der ukrainischen Ethnologie in der späten Sowjetunion und nach 1991 und die Verwendung von Interview- und Oral-History-Techniken
Natalia Otrishchenko (Lviv): The Limits of

Engagement: Oral History and the Transformation of Urban Environments in Ukraine
Commentary: Linde Apel (Hamburg)

SECTION V: Post-Socialist Collectives of Memory

Mykola Borovyk (Munich): „Wie jetzt geredet wird, das ist einfach nur beängstigend“: Das sowjetische Narrativ über den Großen Vaterländischen Krieg in den autobiographischen Erinnerungen ukrainischer Anwohner

Nadezhda Beljakova (Moscow), in cooperation with Vera Kljueva: „Helden des Glaubens“ oder ehrliche sowjetische Arbeiter: Sowjetische Vergangenheit der Glaubigen durch Oral History

Commentary: Kobi Kabalek (Jerusalem)

Tagungsbericht *Between Divergent Narratives and National Loyalties: Oral History and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe*. 02.03.2017–03.03.2017, Marburg, in: H-Soz-Kult 13.04.2017.