

CONFERENCE REPORT
ORAL HISTORY AND (POST)SOCIALIST SOCIETIES

FREIBURG, GERMANY

NOVEMBER 3-5, 2005

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The conference 'Oral History and (post)socialist societies' took place in the conference house Wiesneck by Freiburg, Germany, between 3rd and 5th November 2005. The conference was organised by Anke Stephan from the University of Munich and Julia Obertreis from the University of Freiburg and sponsored by the Zeit Stiftung and the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung. Conference languages were German and English and the organisers arranged simultaneous translation which was appreciated by all attendants.

The conference aimed at presenting the wide spectrum of current Oral History research and at exploring a number of specific methodological questions. Its overall question was how Oral History could contribute to the study of socialist and postsocialist situations. Anke Stephan and Julia Obertreis opened the discussions on Thursday with an overview of current Oral History projects and particular methodological questions which Anke Stephan summarised as the following: the question of interviewing techniques and analysis, memory in research and the construction of identity. These issues were recurrent themes which linked all five panels. Each panel consisted of five paper presentations, a commentary and discussion. The papers addressed a wide range of issues drawing on research in a number of Central European countries and the former Soviet Union.

The first session on Thursday concerned the 'Political transition, construction of identity and current debates about the past'. On Friday two parallel sessions took place, one focusing on 'The legacy of emancipation "from above": Female experience and gender in socialism and postsocialism' and the other on 'Competing histories: Public and private remembering, regional and national identities'. During the afternoon participants considered the question of 'Victims and perpetrators: Experiences in repressive systems'. Saturday was dedicated to the topic of 'Everyday life in socialism – lee-ways in dictatorships'. This was followed by a summary provided by the two organisers and the final discussion.

The key-note address by Alexander von Plato opened the conference by asking for a comparison between dealing with the national-socialist past in Germany and dealing with the Stalinist past in the former Soviet Union. Von Plato pointed out that the particular interest of Oral History was the subjective reworking of such transitions since human experience was about establishing coherence. There is no 'zero hour' in people's heads, von Plato reminded the participants. He then raised a number of questions which foreshadowed the following discussions: the question of generation and generational self-perception; the question of continuity and rupture in transitions and their meaning for processes of transformation; the question of comparability of different ways of 're-working' a difficult past.

Sidonia Grama then presented the first paper on 'Features of the collective memory of the Romanian Revolution from December 1989'. Her paper was concerned with the development of collective memory exploring how testimonies of the revolution had changed during the 15 years since the event. This she related to methodological questions, asking what kind of stories might be triggered by the interview situation. Kobi Kabalek then presented his research on 'Young eastern German's perceptions of National Socialism' exploring how different historical events, exposure to different teachings about National Socialism and family background might affect young people's narratives about this period. His paper followed the question of collective memory by looking at history and the relation between vernacular narratives about historical times and personal memories.

Christien Musse explored 'Processes of identity formation in elderly people in Leipzig and the legacy of the GDR' looking at recurrent themes and stories which furthered communal identity and a sense of coherence for her interviewees in eastern Germany. Meike Wulf's paper on 'History and counter-memories in post-Soviet Estonia' brought the questions of memory, history and identity together. Wulf explored life-story interviews with Estonian

historians looking in particular at the individual presentation of history, the existence of counter-narratives due to surveillance, and national identity. The commentary provided by Ulrike Jureit raised a number of questions concerning the issues discussed. She asked, for example, about the appropriate time to research biographical memories, reminding the participants that events will be evaluated in light of later experiences. This, she argued, meant that 'fresh memories' were not necessarily more authentic than events that were later recalled. She highlighted the fact that historical ruptures needed to be portrayed as meaningful in order to support the formation of personal identity. Jureit also asked about the important relation between collective and individual memory, another point that was discussed repeatedly during the next days. Topics mentioned during the ensuing discussion included the following: the significance of generations and age-cohorts for particular kinds of memory and related identity, the role of gender in this respect, and the interview situation as introduced by Grama.

The panel on gender in (post)socialism followed one of these issues by considering women's memory and experience in particular. Julia Gradska discussed how women's stories about beauty during maternity could help us understand Soviet social history with regard to the 1930-1960s. She argued that personal memory is influenced by collective practices of remembering and showed how these stories revealed discourses about motherhood and the 'equality of looks,' whilst pointing to considerable differentiation within the 'Soviet generation', a fact that is often overlooked. Oksana Kis explored the role of ethnicity and historical experience in women's perceptions of the Soviet regime in the Ukraine. Her paper considered two factors which are important in the postsocialist context, but focused on female informants. Anna Tikhmorova considered how clothes and their consumption served as a form of distinction in 1960-1980, comparing the opinions and habits of educated women in the GDR and the Soviet Union. Both papers included a comparative perspective and related to the question of regional variations in the experiences of socialism. Michaela Potancokova then discussed how Slovak women talk about their experiences of childbearing under state socialism. Her paper was aptly titled: 'Reproductive Histories' relating these personal stories to aspects of Soviet social history. Dilyana Ivanova followed this theme by looking at women's social role in her paper entitled, 'Observations on the changes of women's social roles in one industrial community in Bulgaria'. Her paper introduced a historical comparison of socialist and postsocialist times. The commentary by

Natalie Stegman queried two papers' conclusion that women's stories often subverted official narratives. She asked whether this might be due to the interview setting and a lack of anthropological distance: alternatively, she asked, whether there were indeed particular female traditions of telling which enabled alternative memories. She also queried the selected topics of the papers, which clearly focused on women's domains. Stegman raised the important point of whether women's memories were always gendered or whether they sometimes might not be and encouraged further studies of the impact of official versions of gender on individuals' experiences.

The parallel panel on public and private remembering opened with Silvija Kavcic's paper on 'Collective and private memories of Slovenian survivors of the women's concentration camp in Ravensbrueck'. Her paper illustrated how master-narratives in socialist Slovenia formed individual accounts about life in the concentration camp. Kavcic also briefly discussed whether and how recent revisions of history in Slovenia may have impacted personal narratives. Ekaterina Melnikova went on to talk about the adaptations of Russian migrants in the formerly Finish territory of Karelia. Her paper showed vividly how Russian and Finnish histories intertwine in the Karelian landscape, facilitating the development of social ties between the two nations here. Volha Shatalava followed by discussing how 'Oral History (is used) as a resource in the construction of national history and identity in Belarussia'. Her paper started with the argument that Belorussia is often considered to lack national identity and to orient itself toward Russia. Her exploration of life-stories therefore focused on indicators of identity and the presentation and evaluation of Soviet Union time in memory. Marianne Kamp continued this theme of the relation between local culture and socialist structures with regard to Uzbeks' experiences of collectivisation. Her paper, entitled 'Uzbek and socialist lives on the collective farm', considered how Uzbek cultural traditions intertwine with the socialist organisation of life on collectively organised farms. Kamp's presentation proved the great impact of local culture and history on socialist structures and on the individual experience of socialism. Eva Maeder then presented the life-history of a women belonging to a particular religious group of 'old believers' in the Baikal discussing 'religious identity'. Her detailed analysis highlighted how the narrator draws heavily on biblical stories and Christian myth to present and explain aspects of her life. The paper thus highlighted another resource that can be used in the construction of individual life-stories. Daniela Koleva then

provided a thoughtful commentary which raised a number of important questions: whether oral history in (post)socialism is about 'giving voice,' asking the participants to reflect upon whose voice they listen to and encouraging the participants to challenge hegemonic discourses; who remembers and who has the right to memory; the shape of the past in the present. During the discussion Alexander von Plato picked up this discussion and insisted that studies of recent history should also take the longer historical perspective into account. Another important topic of the discussion was the question of whether socialist discourses were challenged by counter-narratives, or rather adapted in locally meaningful ways.

The following panel on 'Victims and Perpetrators' began with Anselma Gallinat's paper on 'Life-stories in interviews and in interaction,' which explored how former political prisoners of the GDR present their life-stories in different social contexts. Her paper argued that the standard 'victim and survivor story' is restrictive, leading to problems in situations where the story might be contested by listeners. Alexey Golubev moved the question of trauma from the personal to the communal level in his discussion of the 'Re-membering and re-evaluating of shameful experiences relating to collaboration with the Secret Police in the post-war Soviet Union'. Golubev argued that such experiences could be considered as 'historical trauma' and explored four strategies of dealing with such trauma. Smaranda Vultur stayed with the secret police, considering the texts written by the Securitate and the more recent oral testimonies of victims. Her paper enquired into the potential for comparison between these two fundamentally different yet related texts. James Mark then moved to examine the perpetrator's perspective by exploring how communist party members explained their lives. He drew on material from Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, exploring a range of question with regard to the relation between master-narratives and individual accounts, looking at how the individual narrator dealt with negative experiences of socialism in this context, for example. Mark also highlighted apparent differences between the three countries. Patricie Hanzlova explored 'Czech Germans' oral histories in Czechoslovakia' with regard to the time after the Second World War and the Communist era. Her paper discussed how Germanness is socially produced and then expressed in individual narratives, looking at the role of events, practices, social networks and institutional structures. Hanzlova related her analysis to the wider official and historical discourse during socialism and after. The commentary by Mary Beth Stein drew the different themes together with a focus on a central

methodological question: the interviews' orality. Whilst the last panel showed what kind of socialist and local traditions underpin (post)socialist experiences and discourses, Stein now asked what kind of postsocialist realities might underpin these narrations. This led to a discussion about the performance of life-stories in different contexts and the question of whether there is something like a more or less fixed individual meta-narrative.

The panel on 'Everyday life in socialism and lee-ways' opened with Simina Radu-Bucurenci's contribution, which explored how people talked about queuing in narratives about the 1980s in Bucharest. Her discussion showed how these narratives provide information about social life and about aspects of the narrators' identity with regard to gender, profession and age. Jana Noskova then talked about the dissidents' ghetto as the everyday life of a particular group of people in the Czech Republic and explored 'the social construction' of this reality. She highlighted several aspects, such as dissidents' isolation from the wider society but also their community, which led to the ghetto's 'ambivalent character'. Kirsti Joesalu's paper concerned the 'Right to happiness' and explored memories of everyday life in Soviet and post-Soviet Estonia. Joesalu used both biographical interviews and written stories to investigate how the Soviet idea of equality is presented as the question of happiness in individual accounts. Tamas Kanyo then returned the discussion to autonomous groups, exploring civil society in the Hungarian Republic. Focusing on two particular groups, he showed how the younger generation was lacking a 'capital of anxiety' which was prevalent amongst the older generation. He also explored the control mechanism in place within the groups and some factors leading their dissolution. Blanka Koffer dealt with yet another particular group; her paper examined the socialist everyday experience of work in the Arts and Humanities, focusing on the Ethnology in the GDR. Koffer's paper explored instances of decision-making in individual narratives with regard to the role of master-narratives and *Eigensinn* [one's own will]. Her discussion related to the question of analysis with regard to the use of techniques such as discourse analysis, network analysis and the comparison of open interviews. Dorothee Wierling's commentary considered the questions raised by these papers with regard to a theoretical point about narrative. She highlighted the notion of narrative scripts. According to her analysis, there are always several scripts, particularly so in socialism. A single script can never accommodate all the experiences of an individual – this requires several scripts. Wierling pointed to the different levels on which historical narratives function:

personal memories, collective memories of the narrative community and official master-narratives (historical politics). Wierling then urged the attendees to move beyond dominant scripts in their interviews using topically centred life-stories.

postgraduate students and renowned academics who contributed equally to the discussions.

The final address by Obertreis and Stephan provided a summary of some of the main points that had been raised during the conference. Stephan began by considering the value of Oral History research for history, arguing that it facilitated insights into topics such as social life and the everyday. She also reviewed the importance of context for narrative, showing how some papers considered the immediate narrative context whilst others explored the wider discourses that impinge upon individual stories. Stephan then considered structures of communication, arguing that these become visible in Oral Histories and are of great importance in the (post)socialist context. Obertreis followed on from there, highlighting the question of the particular character of orality in this context which manifests itself in the close relation between official and in-official/counter discourses. Obertreis asked whether this is indeed an overarching phenomenon. She also raised the question of the other close relation, the one between socialist and postsocialist discourses. It seemed that evaluations in post-socialism are often based on turning socialist categories on their head, whilst structures and themes such as the 'collective' prevailed as points of reference. Obertreis returned to the topic of the interview highlighting how some discussants had combined interviews with ethnography to highlight the context-dependency of narratives.

The ensuing discussion explored a number of contentious points. There was the question of whether Oral History could serve research into factual information. In this respect the difference and relation between history and memory was debated. A further point was the extent to which official socialist discourses may impact past and present self-perception and worldviews. A discussant also noted quite rightly that we ought to take care that we do not to implant our own stereotypes onto the research setting, which remains a danger in the strongly politicised context of (post)socialism.

Obertreis also correctly highlighted the fact that the discussants, who came from a large number of different countries, had found a shared scholarly language to exchange and debate their views. The conference also benefited from its inter-disciplinary audience, which allowed a range of perspectives on methodology in Oral History and narrative theory, and from the mix of experience: young scholars,