

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

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The last few decades in humanities and social sciences revealed that scholars tend to work interdisciplinarily, emphasizing on the value of holistic approaches while researching societies and human interactions. This volume is framed as interdisciplinary research, gathering writings of oral historians, cultural anthropologists and sociologists. Therefore, it will be of interest to a wide scholarly audience.

Cultural anthropology and oral history share two important features. Theoretically each discipline aims to make voicelessness vocal, in other words, to give voices to those who are absent from history textbooks and whose lives don't fit in current national projects and political ideologies. Neither oral historians nor cultural anthropologists are interested in revealing the "true" or "objective" past. Instead they deal with people's personal interpretations of the past. Methodologically both disciplines use the method of interviewing to record a person's narration, documenting people's life experiences. At the same time, anthropological tradition keeps the privacy of informants through the use of pseudonyms or anonymizing study participants completely, while oral historical data is intended for the public record. In addition, anthropology is focused on the context in which interactions occur, the landscape and the everyday which form the bedrock of the conversation between a respondent and a researcher, taking into an account behavior, body language, facial expressions, emotions that follow the conversation. The acknowledgment of the context in which interviews took place and its 'thick description' is a distinctive feature of an anthropological research and one that to some extent is lacking in this volume.

The unifying thread of the book, putting together various authors and their approaches, is an attempt to unchain personal and collective memories from imposed constructions from above: state, published sources, and official historical narratives. The Introduction to the book reflects the goal of the editors and authors to unpack and decolonize the “twilight zones” of oral history, by paying attention to its development in Central-Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. It notes the challenges the discipline faces together with the changes in states and national academic systems. The editors also emphasize the importance of scholarly self-reflection while discovering the “multiple socialist pasts”, which means we must ask ourselves how we, as scholars, speak about the past, and to what extent it influences our research.

The book consists of four parts, accompanied by short introductions. The first part “From Subjects to Agents of History: Political Implications of Oral Historical Research” contains three chapters depicting the political connotations of oral history research in Germany, Poland, Finland and the Russian Federation. It is opened by Alexander von Plato’s theoretical article, in which he asserts that there is no single shared collective memory of the past in any European society. This statement is revealed in various regional contexts in the two following articles by Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk and Alexey Golubev. Witeska-Młynarczyk’s chapter discusses how the institutional policy of post-communist Poland influences public opinion and frames general knowledge about “victims of the communist regime,” a new category of people, who were repressed during the communist era. Being an anthropologist, Witeska-Młynarczyk grounds her research on two years of fieldwork among the members of the Association of Former Political Prisoners in a small Polish town. She examines the complex interplay between state-controlled discourses and practices, influenced by the work of the Institute of National Remembrance, and the everyday life of individuals, drawing on not only her interviews, but also the descriptions of her participant observations obtained from attending gatherings of her study participants. She met them casually and maintained the documents of the Association. The most important part of her research is to understand how self-positioning and self-identification

as national hero / victim of a communist state has been shaped in personal stories of her respondents, and what issues have influenced this understanding (e.g. contemporary Polish historiography, official discourse of national suffering during the communist era, the Roman Catholic Church, communication with the Association community members, their families' memories). Witeska-Młynaczyk argues that those who were silent in communist Poland contribute now to a new ideological metanarrative of Polish suffering under the communism. This echoes Alexey Golubev's research on contradictory multilayered memories of Karelian, Vepsian, Russian Finn and Russian inhabitants of Karelia (Russian Federation) during the Finnish occupation of Eastern Karelia in 1941-1944. Both research cases show how separate individual memories are being substituted by a symbolic collective narrative of suffering, supported from above.

The second part, "Reclaiming the Personal: Between the Collective Vision of History," highlights the relationships between private and public in personal narratives and raises the question of how the researcher influences the respondent's storytelling, how the voices of scholars and study participants interact, and how an interview can become a journey from broken and fragmented to holistic self. It opens with the article by Yelena Rozhdestvenskaya based on thirty in-depth interviews with former *Ostarbeiters* (forced laborers in Nazi Germany) in Pskov oblast, Russian Federation. She researches the narrative means by which former *Ostarbeiters* reconcile their trauma while constructing their identities as "expert witnesses" of Nazi occupation in Russia. Rozhdestvenskaya calls it "narrative trauma compensation" (79), underlining that the possibility to be heard and to articulate the past gives new meaning to the lives of those people. Embracing methods of feminist anthropology and oral history, Natalia Pushkareva's research is focused on biographical narratives of female scholars from the Russian Federation and Belarus, who originate from intellectual urban elites and academic families. Pushkareva claims that, for a long time, dominant male narrative overshadowed a female perspective of the history of their countries and women's own lives in this past. This situation has resulted in underestimation by female academics their own achievements and success together with

the intentions to make them more vocal and visible. Rozalia Cherepanova, basing her chapter on 132 biographic interviews recorded in Chelabinsk, Russian Federation, emphasizes the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting oral history research and interpreting the interviews. She stresses the necessity of oral history to go beyond its methodological limits and use what cultural anthropology offers, primarily, a respect for the informant's privacy and taking into an account the context in which interviews take place. At the same time, Cherepanova directly compares live trajectories of her respondents with well-known literary characters, like Cinderella, Oedipus, and "the small people" (139-141, 143) which causes the reader to question whether the respondents themselves were aware of those categories subscribed to them, and whether they would agree with such labels.

The third part, "The Past Differentiated: Revisiting the Second World War and Its Aftermath," strives to bring the "alternative experiences of the war that never reached public mainstream narratives" (147) to a wider academic and public discussion. As the editors indicate, by this chapter they attempt to put on the surface "the other" history of WW II, which is still partially absent in official mainstream historical narrations of Central-Eastern Europe. Marta Kurkowska-Budzan opens this part, presenting her historical-anthropological research of the anti-communist national underground in Poland. She underlines the importance for oral historians to go beyond the limits of the method, and perceive their study participants anthropologically, which means not only as narrators shedding light on the past and telling the story historians need for the reconstruction of the past, but also acknowledging their own vision of this past and their personal experiences and emotions in it. While conducting her research among former combatants of Polish national underground, she revealed that in the broader context, the narratives of fighting against communist authorities contradict the stories of civilians, who often suffered from the presence of partisans in their villages, and in some cases experienced as much fear towards them as toward communist officials. Therefore, their views on Polish underground may sufficiently differ from the view of former partisans and the current political discourse of their glorification. Gelinada Grinchenko's research focused on the life stories of two

Ukrainians, currently residing in Kyiv, who were children *Ostarbeiters* in Nazi Germany and experienced forced labor camps. This article can serve as an illustration of the difference between oral history and cultural anthropological approaches: while analyzing meticulously the forms and structures of autobiographic narratives, focusing deeply on general models of storytellers' self-representations, peculiarities of the articulation of childhood memories, the plots of those stories, this chapter lacks the context of how those interviews were conducted, how the respondents behaved, what emotions they experienced, and what communication was like between a researcher, who was recording an interview, and a storyteller. Sometimes, however, anthropologists focusing profoundly on the context and interpreting important data from their fieldnotes, risk turning their research into autoethnography (without declaring it) and therefore missing respondents' voices. Thus, the general idea of the reviewed volume to bring together cultural anthropologists and oral historians for a collaborative work seems to deliver a fruitful and promising perspective for further interdisciplinary, collective research.

The fourth part, "Locating Other Memories of Late Socialism," contains three research cases that tend to rethink and reevaluate the multidimensional challenges which followed "late socialism" and the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR. David Curp, based on archival and oral history sources, shows the powerful presence of the Roman Catholic Church in many spheres of life in communist Poland and its role in national liberation, civic, and political movements. He demonstrates the interchangeability of national and religious identities in Poland and the crucial role of the dominant religion even for those Poles who consider themselves secular. Additionally, it would have been fruitful to show how this religious homogeneity, which served as a unifying and liberative impetus for the Polish nation, simultaneously contributed to the exclusion of "domestic others" from the Polish national narrative and religioscape, including Greek Catholics, Orthodox, Ukrainians, Lemkos, Jews, Muslims, non-believers, etc. Natalia Khanenko-Friesen's research on the crossroads of anthropology and history deals with the memories of former peasant workers on collective farms who faced overwhelming changes since the 1990s, and had to adjust to the new realities, which still

contained a number of Soviet social practices. Khanenko-Friesen calls this process “decollectivization” (231) and claims that decollectivized Ukrainian villagers (mostly the generation born after WW II) are a new agent of Ukrainian history whose perspective should be acknowledged both in current political discourse and in historical research. In the volume’s final chapter, Irina Makhovskaya and Irina Romanova show the *Perestroika* period and collapse of the USSR from the perspective of Belarusian rural dwellers. The research targeted people born between late 1940-s and 1960-s and focused on their strategies of surviving and dealing with “foggy future” during late Soviet era and beginnings of independence period.

The publishing of such an edited volume is definitely timely. The research cases pull back the curtain from the life stories of those people who were unseen, marginalized and underestimated during the communist era. Their life experiences can provide new generations with knowledge to understand the complicity of the political and social challenges we face nowadays. Hardly anyone will be able to question that 2014 was a turning point in world history, going far beyond the borders of Ukraine, Eastern Europe or the post-Soviet space. We all were forced to face new lines of division, cracks in personal and community life, fluctuations of borders and identities, wars – hybrid and physical, and the consequences of this turbulence. Nowadays, in 2020, we need to understand how to handle living in the world which is still animated by the legacies of two world wars; how to comprehend and interpret the new waves of violence and their effects; how can we implement our scholarly visions and tools to create something constructive, not disruptive, and help those who seek to be heard and understood. In this regard, the collaboration of oral historians and cultural anthropologists can be profoundly productive. A number of authors in the book underline the limitations of oral history research, filling in the gaps by scrupulously explaining the historical, political, social, economic, and specific local contexts which surrounds the respondents and their stories. And that is exactly what gives the reader a deeper contextualized view of the qualitative data presented in the volume. As Marta Kurkowska-Budzan concludes: “As a historian working with oral narratives performed in specific personal

contexts, through the narrators' experiences, I learned very little. As an anthropologist, I learned so much" (173).

The final sentence in Rozhdestvenskaya's article, "The oral history interviews we have recorded in Russia have not become public documents of the past, at least not yet" (99), opens up a much broader discussion on methodology and the ethics of research. What can we as scholars do to disseminate our research? How can we implement our findings for the benefit of society? What is the public outcome of our research findings, and more importantly, how can we protect the lives of our study participants while making their stories accessible to a wider audience? Hopefully this edited volume will pave the road to new interdisciplinary constructive cooperation, following a new book raising the abovementioned and the other important questions.