

Twenty Years After: On the Development of Oral History in Central and Eastern Europe¹

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It is a pleasure and an honour for me to give this speech at the opening ceremony of the 16th International Oral History Conference here in Prague. Never before in the history of our Association has its biennial meeting taken place in a capital east of the former world border between East and West. To be here in Prague, the city of Eastern Europe's "1968," in a capital that was under Soviet domination for over 40 years and whose residents lived in the so-called real socialism, is a pleasure, I believe, for all of us, and personally for me.

As soon as 1989/90 – the Soviet empire had just collapsed – contacts were established between Western and Central and Eastern European Historians. Eastern European colleagues participated at the International Oral History Conference in Essen, Germany, in 1990, and organized a panel about "Oral History in the Soviet Union."²

More important in this context, however, were other international conferences organized for the first time by Eastern European historians, beginning with a major international conference organized by the "Memorial" Society in Moscow in 1989, especially by Irina Scherbakova, Arsenij Roginsky, and their colleagues, and another one in 1994 in L'viv (L'viv) organized by Victor Suzak from the National University of L'viv. Besides Russian and other Eastern European historians many oral historians from Western Europe participated in these conferences, including Nancy Adler, Paul Thomson, Selma Leydesdorff, Daniel Bertaux, and many others. We felt that new times – posing new challenges to contemporary historians – were coming and that we would be part of this development. We discussed and discussed, for days and nights, and we posed many questions, some of which continue to be asked today. How will the people deal with this fundamental change in the political and economic system? How will they manage the everyday life under the new, very difficult political and economic conditions that demanded completely new orientations, attitudes, and qualifications?

During a meeting of the polit bureau of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 3 November 1989, and after a visit from East Germany's new head of state, Egon Krenz, the successor of Erich Honecker, Michael Gorbachev said: The people of the German Democratic Republic, the GDR, "will be sold with their innards and guts. If the GDR enters the world market

¹ This is the edited and extended version of Alexander von Plato's keynote address to the 16th International Oral History Conference, Prague, Czech Republic, 7-11 July 2010. Edited by Alexander Freund.

² Alexander von Plato, "Oral History in der Sowjetunion, Schwerpunkt," *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 1 (1990): 1-9.

with prices of the world market their life standard will sink to the bottom at once.” His prophecy was right, not only in describing the GDR, but nearly all countries that existed under the hegemony of the Soviet Union, and especially the Soviet Union itself.

Other questions we discussed in 1989 and 1994 included: How will different social groups remember the past? What about the elites, especially the political ones? Should the responsible persons in the party, in the security police or the army, be punished? And above all the question: What about the “dis-synchrony” of political changes and personal orientations? Will we have similar reactions as in various countries after 1945, especially in Germany, when the crimes of the former system were denied or when the past was seen through rose tinted glasses? How will the people work through their former orientations?

Typically, personal changes followed political changes, as the philosopher Ernst Bloch declared in his thesis of the “dis-synchrony.” He showed that a lot of problems result from this dis-synchrony: The main problem is that the past is not “done” in a personal sense, is not yet finished. There were, for instance, plans that could not be fulfilled; there were losses of competences and of security (seeing the world around them). This led to anger and frustration, to an irrational defense of the old past against the new presence.

If we look at the two Germanys of the post-war era we see that Ernst Bloch stimulates us to analyze consciousness or personal orientations after political breaks. The old systems were not thrown away by most Germans, neither after 1945 nor after 1989. The old systems continued to be attractive for parts of the people; the new systems were not accepted by numerous members of the society. In the case of National Socialism, only a few perpetrators were persecuted and most of the victims were not recognized. These are differences to the time after 1989.

In West Germany, it took about fifteen years before German courts sentenced perpetrators for their crimes during the Holocaust, more than 40 years until gypsies were recognized as victims, more than 50 years until deserters were recognized and forced labourers received compensation. It needed one or two generations to see the criminal character of the National Socialist dictatorship.

Coming back to 1989 and 1994: About 20 years ago we knew that these questions needed oral history methods to be answered. We were hopeful that these conditions would lead to boom of oral history and life story research.

That was 20 years ago. In the meantime we have had the possibility to look back, to analyze the most recent past, to check the new systems and the different reactions of different people in different countries, and the development of oral history in these countries. I believe that 20 years are a perfect time to have the International Oral History Conference in a capital like Prague and to discuss these and other questions.

At first sight our hopes for a boom of oral history in Central and Eastern Europe came true. The large-scale project “Living under Socialism” here in Prague, carried out by Miroslav Vanek and his colleagues, is a very good example of oral history research in a society of a former “real socialist” state. The founding of the Czech Oral History Association as well as the Ukrainian one are also signs of hope. Some members from the Ukrainian association are here today, like Gelinada Grinchenko, Tetiana Pastushenko, or Natalja Khannenکو-Friesen. In Russia, some universities founded institutes in the early ‘90s, as in Moscow, Altai, Vyatka, and Kaliningrad, as Irina Rebrova shows (who is here as well). Later – at the beginning of the 21st century – regional Russian oral history centres were founded in Woronesh (with a summer university in oral history and conferences organized by Natascha Timofeewa), in St. Petersburg, in Barnaul, where a larger oral history conference took place in 2006, at Petrozavodsk State University (Karelia) in 2004, in Stavropol in 2006, in Krasnodar, in Kuban, and in some other cities. In Poland several oral history projects were done, mainly by the foundation “KARTA.” In Bulgaria, oral history projects were undertaken mainly by ethnologists (like Ana Luleva), sociologists, and historians at the University of Sofia and some other universities.

There were, however, the other sides of the “Big Change” in 1990: the “Balkan” or “Yugoslavia Wars.” Selma Leydesdorff, who is engaged in investigating the crimes of Srebrenica³ (and who is here as well) organized summer universities in Bosnia Herzegovina where a lot of international oral historians were teaching. Two bigger international oral history documentation projects established ties with historians, sociologists, and journalists and supported oral history in more than 20 countries of Central and Eastern Europe. One was the project on the concentration camp Mauthausen, coordinated by Gerhard Botz and his colleagues in Vienna; another was the Forced Laborers project, coordinated by Almut Leh, Christoph Thonfeld, and myself from the Open University in Hagen.⁴

Here at the 16th International Oral History Conference, there are – apart from the named countries – colleagues from several Central and Eastern European universities, as from the Baltic States, from Slovakia, Croatia, Hungary and others. Nevertheless we only know individual oral historians from other Eastern European countries. Hopefully, this Conference will bring a push in oral history in those countries as well.

At second sight, the themes of oral history in these countries did not live up to the expectations we discussed in the early 1990s in L’vov: Most of the mentioned present oral history groups are working on subjects concerning the Second World War, the occupation by the Germans, and the crimes of the

³ Selma Leydesdorff, “Die Traumata von Srebrenica. Vom Ringen überlebender Frauen um Erinnerung und Zukunft,” in: Siegfried Mattl, Gerhard Botz, and Stefan Karner, *Krieg, Erinnerung, Geschichtswissenschaft* (Vienna et al: Böhlau, 2010), 351-375.

⁴ Alexander von Plato, Almut Leh, Christoph Thonfeld, eds., *Hitler’s Slaves. Life Stories of Forced Labourers in Nazi-Occupied Germany* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2010).

German army and the SS; in some countries the persecution of Jews and Gypsies and the experiences of forced labourers are part of the focus on the Second World War. It is the Second World War that is the main subject of oral history projects in Central and Eastern Europe, but not the history of the big changes after 1945 or 1989/90, nor interviews with former elites or the victims of the previous system, nor the problems of living under new conditions and the difficulties of reorientation for the large majorities in these countries, nor governments' *Vergangenheitspolitik* (the politics of history), that is, the ways in which they addressed or failed to address the human rights violations committed under previous regimes. That is interesting because it shows the big gaps, the lack of historical research in these countries in the decades before 1989.⁵

Therefore it is understandable that now oral historians try to close at least some of these gaps. In some countries there is research done on other themes that concern the change of 1989. First of all I would like to mention again the work of the Czech colleagues and their very interesting project "Living under Socialism." It is a successful attempt to document the memories of socialism and the difficulties before and after the change of 1989 in different classes and milieus. The Russian Society "Memorial" has published a lot of biographies and persecution reports of victims of the Stalin era. The Polish foundation published several surveys of different groups living under both dictatorships – including refugees who were expelled by German, Soviet, and even Polish administrations. Just now the Czech colleague Tomas Vilimek, the Polish colleague Piotr Filipkowski, and I are working on oral history projects with dissidents of "real socialism" in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the GDR, building on previous projects of other colleagues.

In most of the countries where we interviewed former forced labourers of the Nazi period, we asked every single interviewee: What do you remember of your time in Germany? We also want to know how the present governments have dealt with former forced labourers. The answers were very different. It seems – as one example – that forced labourers who came from countries with dictatorships were willing to differentiate between "individuals" and the "system."

Summarizing these and similar projects in other countries we see an increasing number of oral history projects that are dealing not only with the Second World War but also with the socialist times as well.

I believe that the GDR is a special case, because most of the contemporary historians at universities, but not all, had their scientific socialization in the Western part of Germany. Especially the younger ones have almost no problems to work with oral history methods unlike their predecessors in the GDR (or in the West). No wonder they are working now on mental history of the big changes in 1945 or 1989/90; they are trying to

⁵ Germany is an exception: Because of its history the changes of the political systems in 1945 and in 1989 were "engines" of the development of oral history and a lot of research projects.

interview members of former elites or victims of the previous system; they are working on the everyday life in the GDR; they are analyzing the *Vergangenheitspolitik* of former governments and are trying to find out what the “social cement” of the GDR society was. At present there is a debate about the role of the government, the media, and historians advocating specific views on and judgments of GDR society and the regime of the SED (the Socialist Unity Party that ruled East Germany for forty years). (The Institute for Historical Studies in Potsdam plays a central role in this debate.)

There are two other reasons why research on the GDR is rather manifold: There is an institution which is archiving the files of the former security state police and working on it, the so called “Gauck-” or “Birthler-” government agency (named after the first two directors, because the official title is complicated). It is the institution that employs more historians than any other in Germany. Second, also specific to Germany: There is a foundation that supports documentation and research on the history of the GDR. Both institutions are part of the German *Vergangenheitspolitik*. Perhaps we can compare these institutions with the Polish “Institute for National Memories” (Instytut Pamięcy Narodowej, IPN) and in a very restricted sense with some memorials and museums in Eastern Europe, especially in Tallinn, Riga, Budapest, and others.

All of the oral history research that is being done in Central and Eastern European countries shows at least two general remarkable results. First, there personal memories and family traditions have been kept alive in spite of and against the views of historical institutions, and sometimes mixed up with former official perspective. Second, there are different memory cultures in these countries that are struggling for the dominant view of the past and that are sometimes hostile to each other. That is no wonder. In most of these countries “the” party and their security police had ruled over the people, sometimes with terror, sometimes with hopes, providing social security or security in the sense of law and order.

If you are looking across the borders of the Eastern European countries you can see that the assumption that there is only one memory culture in one country is a chimera. In most of the countries there are different remembrance cultures, struggling against each other, fighting for dominance over history. Especially in the countries where dictatorships had ruled or civil wars had taken place, these fights are sometimes extreme, for instance in Chile or in South Africa, in Argentina or in Romania, in Nicaragua or in Korea etc., perhaps less harsh in (East) Germany and in Brazil.

Different memory cultures or the struggles for dominance over history, however, is typical of every society – whether there had been dictatorships, civil wars or not. The different experiences and interests of generations or genders, of different classes or political parties etc. lead to different views on history and to different memory cultures.

In most of these countries the former elites even at the universities try to push back the methods of oral history because oral historians distrust the

dominance of a historiography that is based on the documents of the authorities. We do not want to reduce history to objective dates and statistics. We are the guarantors of a different perspective. We are the ones who try to keep the importance of the subjects and the dimension of personal experience in historiography. We like to interrogate members of the elites *and* we give the repressed people, the underdogs, the minorities, and the silent majorities a voice – not only in dictatorships.

I hope this spirit will guide this conference!