

Memory of the Communist Past as a Research Field

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More than three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the debate over the study of socialism continues. Socialism is not a closed page for the researchers, not at least because we keep living with its consequences. By prioritising the “bottom-up” perspective and studying the problems of everyday life under socialism, anthropology has a specific role among the social sciences. The insight into the fabric of everyday life gives the anthropologists a chance to contribute to the understanding of socialism as a unique experience in human history.

An inexhaustive overview reminds us that the anthropology of socialism¹ took shape in the 1970s as an Anglophone field of research and as a manifestation of the theoretical renovation of social anthropology (Hann, 2009: 134–135). After the publication of the results of pioneering studies, carried out through field work in Eastern Europe and Eurasia since the 1970s, “the empirical harvest was immensely valuable” (ibid: 135). There is no doubt that both the climate of the cold war and the personal political stance of the authors have influenced the way whereby they present “the ethnographic facts”. Some of the most valuable investigations conducted during the last two decades of socialism (Kideckel, 1993; Lapland, 1995; Creed, 1998), were published with a delay, in the 1990s (Hann, 2009: 135–136).

¹ We shall use the term “socialism” when it concerns the everyday practices and in compliance of the way the epoch was called by our interlocutors; referring to it as “communism” concerns the political power.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the earliest attempts at a theoretical synthesis of what had been achieved in the anthropology of socialism (Sampson, 1991; Gellner, 1993; Hann, 1993; Verdery, 1996) point out the capacity of anthropologists to carry out their research beyond the ideological clichés and to present the real everyday life of “the ordinary people” under socialism (Sampson, 1991: 17; Gellner, 1993: XIV; Verdery, 1996: 11), to reveal “‘how the system really works’, the *pays réel* as opposed to the *pays légal*” (Hann, 1993: 9).

The period since the beginning of the 1990s has been marked by a boom in the investigations on socialism by historians, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, culturologists and the like. For various reasons some countries have been the object of much greater interest: up to the start of the new millennium, literature on what used to be the GDR reached 7700 titles (Todorova, 2010: 9). The anthropology of socialism, in particular, has been developing along new lines compared to the time of the last two decades of that age in Eastern Europe. The interest of most Western anthropologists, who had worked across the Iron Curtain, was (logically) directed after 1989 to studying the turbulent post-socialist transformations. On the other hand, the anthropological study of socialism has included scholars from different countries ceasing to be only an Anglophone initiative. Native scholars have also joined in this process, while interest in socialism as an historical “heritage” has become internationalized within even broader frameworks: international teams are joining efforts. We shall illustrate this statement by an example from Bulgaria.

THE CASE OF BULGARIA

No doubt, up to the beginning of the 1990s, Bulgaria was one of the least studied countries in the Anglophone anthropology of socialism. However, the two studies carried out almost simultaneously at the end of the 1980s and published later, have been among the most memorable achievements of the discipline (Creed, 1998; Kaneff, 2004). The investigation of *Everyday Culture in the Socialist Village* (1993–2001), localized in the village of Raduil, Samokov region, and accomplished by a Bulgarian-German team, was one of the most notable research projects, devoted to socialism in Bulgaria. Apart from publications in various editions,² the project was characterized by meticulously developed research methods, combining “the oral history” with pedantic studies of central and especially of local archives. This was also the first involvement of Bulgarian anthropologists in this field of research. Later on other Bulgarian scholars contributed to the development of (the historical) anthropology of socialism (Luleva, 2001: 26–39; Ivanova, Luleva, Popov, 2003; Luleva, 2006: 173–186; Benovska-Sabkova, 2004: 109–128; Benovska-Sabkova, 2006: 25–42). In a sense the international project *Alltagsskultur im Sozialismus* [The Everyday Culture of Socialism] (2002–2004) with the participation of scholars from Slovakia, Germany, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Estonia, Russia and Poland has been “an extension” of

² The best remembered publications have been presented in Bulgarian in a special issue of the *Bulgarian Folklore* journal, Nos. 3–4, 1997 (cf. Dobрева, Roth, Eds., 1997) and in a collection of papers in German (Grimm, Roth, Eds., 1997).

what had been a Bulgarian-German project, started and accomplished in the village of Raduil.

From the start of the new millennium on, a diverse community of researchers of socialism in Bulgaria developed and extended along two basic lines. The international interest in Bulgaria was enriched by the work of Austrian scholars Ulf Brunnbauer, a historian and anthropologist, and Karin Taylor, an anthropologist (Taylor, 2006; Brunnbauer, 2007); and American anthropologists Christofer Scarboro and Kristen Ghodsee (Scarboro, 2006, 2012; Ghodsee, 2005).

Along with this, as a result of the institutionalization of this field of research, the study of socialism in Bulgaria by historians, anthropologists and sociologists received a considerable impetus. In 2005 an *Institute for the Study of the Recent Past* was founded (in Sofia) and in the first ten years of its existence published twenty-one monographs and collections of papers, as well as fourteen volumes of recollections, memoirs, recorded biographies and others.³ Unlike the Institute of the Recent Past, the “Ethnology of Socialism and Post-Socialism” section, which took shape in 2010 at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), has no independent sources of financing. Most of the publications and projects of the Section have been devoted to post-socialism; moreover, two innovative dissertations on the anthropology of socialism, dealing with the collectivization and the policies towards Muslim women in Bulgaria (Jancheva, 2012; Petkova, 2013) have been defended recently in the Section. Lately, Ana Luleva (2021) studied socialist Bulgaria through the lenses of the destruction of social trust and the subsequent paralysis of the ability of collective action in the Bulgarian society.

No matter how incomplete this review, what has to be done is “to follow the ups and downs of the different explanatory modes and models of studying socialism” (Todorova, 2010: 18). According to Maria Todorova, what has been observed is “a gradual but perceptible shift from the dominance of the totalitarian paradigm (or its versions), to the modernization one, something, in fact, closer to the (at least official) self-perception of the elites and the population at large during socialism itself” (ibid).

It cannot be denied, however, that the accumulation of studies on topics like consumerist culture, free time and entertainments under socialism, or just on (the pacified) late socialism chart out a certain trend. The recent series of books dedicated to “remembering” and to “nostalgia” for socialism (Todorova, 2010; Todorova, Dimou, Troebst, *Eds.*, 2014; Todorova, Gille, *Eds.*, 2012) can be defined as a more extreme expression of this trend, which clearly and openly testify (and in places explicitly state) a politically coloured, left-wing interpretation of socialism (at least as far as the editors go). As Todorova (2010: 16) argues, “remembering communism can be seen as part of the memory of the Left alternative (social democratic, anarchist, communist, etc.) in Western Europe and North America as well”. Sometimes the work of the anthropologists turns into overt communist propaganda, as contained in the book by Kristen Ghodsee *The Left Side of History* (Ghodsee, 2015). In the last case the question remains open where is the professional commitment of the anthropologist for objectivity and value-free judgement.

3 Cf. the site of the Institute of the Recent Past: www.minaloto.org. Visited: 10. 06. 2021.

THE CASE OF SLOVAKIA

In Slovakia, the era of Communist rule was in particular studied after 1989, much like in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The 1990s were transformational for Slovak ethnology not only because subjects that had previously been unexplored, censored, or taboo were suddenly open to scientific investigation, but also because the methodological and theoretical toolkit available to researchers was undergoing significant expansion. Issues such as the continuity and conflict of social values (Ratica, *Ed.*, 1991, 1992),⁴ social change and transformation (Danglová, 1995; Podoba, 1998, Torsello, 2004; Pine, Podoba, *Eds.*, 2007), nationalism and collective identities (Podoba, 2000; Kiliánová, Kowalská, Krekovičová, *Eds.*, 2009), the effect of historical changes throughout the 20th century on people's everyday lives (Danglová, 2003; Popelková, 2007; Vrzgulová, Popelková, 2007), and, finally, the collective (cultural) memory and memory culture (Salner, *Ed.*, 2020a, 2020b; Vrzgulová, 2011, 2018) were thrust into the forefront of scholarly interest. Towns and cities were increasingly displacing the country as the focus of ethnological research (Popelková, Salner, 2005).

Compared to other post-communist countries, Slovakia was not so much in the focus of the “western” researchers’ interest. The book of J. Larsson (2013) brought an inspiring understanding of critical thinking in post-socialist Slovakia. Through an ethnographic study, he examines the political discourse and uncovers patterns of social analysis and criticism in post-1989 Slovak society. After 2000, everyday life in socialism was studied by several scholars working within domestic as well as international research projects (Paríková, 2004; Herzánová, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b; Roth, *Ed.*, 2006; Salner, 2008; Soukupová, Luther, Salner, *Eds.*, 2014). They tried to create a foundation for interdisciplinary collaboration between representatives of humanities and social sciences. The publishing outcomes of the domestic projects made up a rich tapestry of partial case studies and insights into the exceedingly complex issue of cultural manifestations and ways of life in Communist (Czecho-)Slovakia (Profantová, *Ed.*, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2015). Even though many lacked clearly defined theoretical frameworks.

The studies focused on European post-socialism are often understood only to be limited to the region of Central and East European countries, though they could be taken (at least part of the outputs) as a basis for an anthropology of European peripheries (Kojanić, 2020: 50–51). O. Kojanić proposes based “on scholarship in post-socialist Europe, which has, to a large degree, focused on various forms of peripherality in which objects of study are seen to be situated” (Kojanić, 2020: 52). Following his idea, those papers and research focused on the social change and everyday life during socialism mentioned above, have the potential to contribute to the larger picture of this issue.

On the other hand, targeted systematic research into the social representations of Communism, constructed in the memories of the ‘generation of experience’ (Kreisslová, Nosková, Pavlásek, 2019: 64–65), was missing in Slovakia for years. In 2017 we launched the project *Current Images of Socialism* to start systematically mapping the

4 The literature mentioned in this part of the text represents only a sliver of the overall publication output dealing with ethnological research of the Communist past in Slovakia.

biographical narratives of people who lived in Communist Slovakia, employing the oral history method.⁵ The interviews we have recorded provide a subjective, multi-perspectival view of the recent past. Our research has had a basic and simultaneously safeguarding character (considering the age of the respondents), aimed at ‘communicative memory’ (Assmann, 2016: 9–45) in modern-day Slovak society and the ways in which the past is or isn’t communicated at present (Crowshaw, Leydesdorff, 2008). The acquired data shows how everyday life in Communism is constructed in the participants’ memories. Simultaneously, it represents a tool for understanding life in non-democratic regimes. Analysing it yields various insights into the manifold existential strategies and ways of life that individuals and groups adopted in the face of coercive state power. These insights suggest that the regime could not achieve complete homogeneity of behavioural patterns across the whole of society (Passerini, 2008). The results of our research thus have the potential to contribute to a new interpretation of our recent past and to help us avoid the pitfalls of totalitarian-historical and nationalist narratives which continue to persist in Central and South-East European historiography and social science as far as the given period is concerned (Hudek, 2013; Kolář, Pullmann, 2016).

INTERNATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE *MEMORY OF THE COMMUNIST PAST*

One of the goals of the project was to create an international communication platform bringing together representatives of various scientific disciplines involved in researching the era of Communist rule in Central and South-East Europe. The first step was a conference, which, as a result of 2020–2021 Covid-19 epidemiological measures in effect at the time, took place online.⁶ The participants presented a broad spectrum of subjects as well as of theoretical and methodological approaches they apply in their work. The subsequent discussions yielded several challenges and potential themes for collaboration related to the methodological and ethical aspects of researching the memory of the Communist past, the possible theoretical approaches to issues concerning the diversity of social (group) memory, the relationships between individual (biographical), communicative (group), and cultural (national) memory (Kaźmierska, 2016), and between memory politics or public discourse and communicative (group) memory.

In this volume of *Slovenský národopis*, we present a selection of papers that give an idea concerning the variety of the themes, methodological approaches, and interpretations in the present-day Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and in the countries of former Yugoslavia.

5 The APVV 160345 *Current Images of Socialism* project involved ethnologists and social historians from academic institutions in Bratislava, Banská Bystrica, and Košice. For more information on this project, see <https://www.obrazysocializmu.net/>.

6 The conference agenda, book of abstracts, and recordings of individual presentations and discussions are available online at: <https://www.obrazysocializmu.net/conference>.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, oral history and memory studies became popular in Central and Eastern European academic research. **Radmila Švaříčková Slabáková** seeks an answer to the question of whether scholars from the region were merely following West-invented and introduced theoretical paradigms or whether they are developing innovative approaches of their own. She explores the differences and similarities between oral history method and memory studies, as well as the significance of both in the re-evaluation of Communist history and historiography. On the examples of Czech and Polish researchers, she identifies novel home-grown approaches as well as international inspirations.

As a repressive institution, prison is one of the pillars of the political power, both at a symbolical level and in the everyday life, in the countries under communist regimes. **Kristýna Bušková, Klára Pinerová, and Michal Louč** provide us the insight into the internal world of prisons as they focus on the point of view of the prison's staff, i.e., representatives of the authorities. Educated professionals, the interlocutors adopt three types of narrative identity (respectively, political philosophy) configurations. Personal narratives converged with two irreconcilable master narratives: the political-ideological (i.e., communist); and the humanist one. The third type of narrative identity configuration reflected a more complicated, opportunist pattern. While not identifying with the dominant political-ideological narrative and rejecting its ideological content implicitly, persons with such identity configuration complied in public with the dominant master narrative in their behaviour. Even rigid institutions like communist prisons, therefore, should not be described as places of full homogenization and total submission.

Another contribution demonstrates that, despite decades gone, there still exist valuable and almost forgotten archival sources from the socialist era. **Janette Gubricová** based her observations on the study of school chronicles (handwritten records of events and activities in the elementary schools), in socialist Czechoslovakia. The ideological indoctrination of children used to start early in socialist schools – not only in Czechoslovakia, but all over the countries of “real socialism”. The formation of positive concern to Soviet Union is a task of priority, both in the activities of the Pioneer Organization, and in school chronicles in particular. Chronicles, an almost forgotten page of the history of socialism, used to periodically remind us of not just the basic symbols of communism or of the Soviet country, but also to make way for the influence of the Soviet popular and children's culture. Last but not least, Gubricová's contribution opens the perspective on the lost visual world and iconography of the socialist epoch.

A paper from Poland is devoted to the post-socialist public remembrance cultures regarding the Communist era. **Agnieszka Balcerzak** studies the mechanisms of memory culture and the commercialisation of elements and phenomena related to the Communist legacy in Poland on the example of newly created tourist attractions in Warsaw. She describes how material remnants of the past are being transformed into products of the tourism industry, commercial museums, and gastronomic institutions. She considers them to be manifestations of a nostalgic shift in the memory concerning the Communist era, which can also be witnessed in other European Post-Communist countries.

Internet memes referring to the image of the Communist leader of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, are explored by **Marta Harasimowicz**. She analyses the cultural images that

these elements of novel social communication produce and their relation to the narratives formed in the context of the politician's official and unofficial representations during the Communist era, as well as in the context of present-day pop culture. In the postmodern narratives about Tito, represented in the meme culture, she identifies a part meaningfully connected to the mythology of the former regime. She also describes others, which are expressions of nostalgia for the given era and still others that, based on this approach, are generating completely new contexts.

Present-day experiences strongly shape the social memory and certain contributions in this issue give especially sound arguments in this respect. The observations by **Slávka Otčenášová** on the way people in Eastern Slovakia imagined "the West" under socialism, and after it, show that communist stigmatization of the political emigration in the epoch still influences perceptions of emigration, even contemporary economic emigration.

One personal life story from the so-called normalisation era in Czechoslovakia (the years following the invasion of the country by the armies of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968) is presented by **Petra Schindler-Wisten**. It is told in two oral history interviews separated by a twenty-year period. Whether and how the narrator's remembrances have evolved and in what way the interlocutor reflects on his own narration from two decades earlier? This methodological approach gives perspective on the evolution of the man's life story, his evaluation of the given historical era, and his self-presentation. The author came to the conclusion that "the recurrent interviews especially after longer periods can bring some movements in the interpretation of the life experiences." At the same time, however, the core of the biographical interview stays identical.

CONCLUSION

The Communist past as a research field includes two main approaches to this historical era. One studies the lived reality of people under Communist rule. The other focuses on the ways in which the era is constructed in the memory culture, on what narratives about life in Communism are propagated by those who experienced it, and on how these diverse and often antagonistic memories seep into the current media and public discourse and memory politics. One of the principal challenges of present-day ethnology and anthropology dealing with the Communist era is the search for new sources of data.⁷ This volume should serve as evidence that scholars are tackling this challenge quite successfully. The authors present innovative approaches and themes, combining results of qualitative research and analyses of archival texts and visual artefacts reflecting the Communist past via the Internet or the new social communication platforms. Although they do not always expand upon their theoretical frameworks, it is possible to locate within them, for instance, concepts of coming to terms with (Communist) power in its prime as well as attempts to define how memories concerning this historical era are constructed in individual post-Communist countries,

⁷ For an example of an innovative approach to archival data, see the explorations of citizens' complaints: letters written by ordinary people to different institutions of Communist state power (see overview in Benovska-Sabkova, 2015).

whether at the level of collective (national) or group (family) memory. Present-day research into the Communist past is characterised by the fact that the field is attracting ever-increasing numbers of young scholars who did not personally experience the regime. It is inspiring to be able to follow their thinking and their interpretations of new research. You can acquaint yourself with both in this volume.

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