

Between Old Traditions and New Approaches: Locating Oral History and Memory Studies in East Central Europe

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The article explores how oral history and memory studies have been used in East Central Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain. It focuses particularly on the question of whether Eastern European scholars only reproduce what was invented in the West, or whether they advance their original concepts and ideas. Both disciplines have been involved in reassessing the history of communism and the communist version of history itself and both contributed to revealing memoirs obscured by the communist regime, even if the role of oral history may be considered as pivotal in this process. Although oral history had been practiced in the region at least since the 1970s, it was introduced as a new discipline according to the Western criteria after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Memory studies and their most successful concept, the “lieux de mémoire”, were implemented into the region later and the promoters of the concept were predominantly Western scholars. Drawing on the uses of the term “historical consciousness” in Czech and Polish research, the article argues that various strategies associated with the “return to Europe” can be found in the region when promoting native traditions and equalizing them with the Western ones.

Key words: oral history, memory studies, lieux de mémoire, East Central Europe, communism, historical consciousness, collective memory, methodology

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, two international conferences were organized in Poland. The first, in Łódź, invited oral historians from East Central Europe, for the second, in Warsaw, memory studies scholars from the region gathered.¹ Both attempted to elucidate the specificities

¹ Oral history in Central-Eastern Europe: current research areas, challenges and specificity, Łódź, 17–18 September 2015; Memory in Southern and Western Slavic Cultures, Warsaw, 27–28 November, 2015.

of oral history and memory studies respectively in this part of Europe. The participants were asked to reflect upon the question of whether there are any distinct features to be assigned to the disciplines as they have been practiced in this region. Do Central-Eastern European scholars only reproduce what was invented in the West, or do they advance their original concepts and ideas?

The concerns of the organizers have been shared by other researchers in both fields. Recently, oral historians and memory studies scholars have tackled the issue (for oral history Khanenko-Friesen, Grinchenko, 2015; for memory studies Pakier, Wawrzyniak, 2013), though the problem hasn't been studied systematically and with respect to the diversity of practices in various countries in the region.² Symptomatic is that both Łódź and Warsaw conferences were prepared by different groups of researchers and had no evident relation to each other. While several papers read during both conferences could be easily interchangeable, the conferences attracted different groups of participants. A mere glimpse at scholar production on "memory" and various research centres in East Central Europe may underline an assumption that oral historians and memory scholars from the region have reproduced a pattern typical for both disciplines in the West. Since their initiation, though interrelated in their focus on memory, oral history and memory studies have been considered distinct and separate disciplines with their own canon publications, book editions, journals, international associations, conferences, and even study programmes. Seldom have scholars from one field quoted researchers from the other group in their publications, and, in the words of Alistair Thomson, very rarely have these scholars taken their achievements out of the house and past the front door (Hamilton, Shopes, 2008: VII).

Both disciplines have been used in East Central Europe to reflect upon the political and social changes brought by the collapse of the communist regime; both disciplines have been involved in reassessing the history of communism and the communist version of history itself. The fall of the Iron Curtain released memories which had been silenced or distorted by the communist regime. The accession of the countries of the former Eastern bloc to the European Union permitted their articulation at a European level, confronting the memory of the Holocaust with memory of the Gulag (Troebst, 2010; Wydra, 2012; Zessin-Jurek, 2016). From the outside, post-communist Eastern Europe has been perceived as a "bewildering array" (Redding, 2018) of various personal, local, and national memory cultures, often conflicting and antagonistic. Western, and recently also Eastern European, scholars have attempted to give broader insights about memory disputes in these countries, as well as about the antagonisms which transcend national borders (Andersen, Törnquist-Plewa, 2016; Blaive, Gerbel, Lindenberger, 2011; Mink, Neumayer, 2013; Pakier, Wawrzyniak, 2016). While the content and the complexity of the memories have been explored in several of these societies, researchers have been less interested in re-evaluating the ways in which oral history and memory studies operate in the region. What fuelled and motivated practices used by researchers to explore "memories" in East Central Europe? What was the role of both disciplines in re-conceptualizing the past? Were they equally important after the collapse of the communist regime? Finally, were these disciplines established as

2 The volume by Pakier and Wawrzyniak is dedicated mainly to Poland, the collection by Khanenko-Friesen and Grinchenko includes studies focused on Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland.

innovations and according to the Western patterns, or did they follow their own native traditions?

A scholar attempting to answer such epistemological questions has to deal with several difficulties. Both fields are largely interdisciplinary, perhaps multidisciplinary rather, and pursued by scholars of various disciplines, such as historians, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, political scientists, literary scholars, and many others. Oral history is not only a field of study but also a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the memories of people, and it features extreme diversity; academic oral history research may be very different from oral history undertaken by NGOs or local, community historians. Memory studies have not yet agreed on a common definition, though the most quoted is “non-paradigmatic, transdisciplinary, centreless enterprise” (Olick, Robbins, 1998: 106). The words “the abundance of research, not its deficiency” (Pakier, Wawrzyniak, 2013: 257) have been recently used in describing the studies of memory in the region. The second inconvenience is related to language questions; many studies in both fields have been published in native languages and are not accessible to an international audience. Due to these constraints, I will focus on the predominantly English written overviews of the state-of-the-art of oral history and memory studies in respective countries. The development of the “*lieux de mémoire*”, a successful concept of memory studies (for an overview see e.g. Berger, Seiffert, 2014), will be considered as an example of how memory studies has evolved in the region. Third, my profession as a historian has led me to explore “historical consciousness”, a supposedly Eastern European analogue of the Western term “collective memory” promulgated by Polish memory scholars. On the other hand, “work with witnesses” will be tackled when investigating the native traditions of oral history in the Czech case. While Polish scholars have been chosen as most visible representatives of memory studies in the region, only Czech oral history out of the whole region has the achievement of providing a president of the International Oral History Association (IOHA). Yet Polish and Czech scholars can be distinguished by choosing various strategies when dealing with their native disciplinary traditions and predecessors.

ORAL HISTORY AND MEMORY STUDIES IN THE WEST

The beginnings of both movements were shaped by a divided Europe and the Iron Curtain that made the free circulation of ideas impossible in the ideologically dominated states of the Eastern bloc. Oral historians place the birth of their movement in the 1960s and 1970s, connecting it with the radical political and social atmosphere of these years (Thomson, 2007). The important mission of oral history has been to democratize history and to give the voice to the people “hidden from history”; workers, women, and indigenous people ignored by traditional historical sources. Gradually, the interviews ceased to function as a mere source of data (Grele, 2007; Thomson, 2007). Memory itself became a subject of inquiry: oral historians wanted to move beyond what people remember, and beyond the content of the interviews, to why people remember. Oral history turned out to be a powerful tool for discovering the process of memory. This period of oral history movement can be defined also by the founding of the IOHA (1966) and by an increasing concern with interdisciplinarity.

Memory studies have evolved due to a renewed interest in the studies of memory in the 1980s. The term “collective memory”, coined by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1994 [1929]), developed in the 1980s into numerous studies on collective memories and collective identities. New discourses on memory were accompanied by a constructivist term in the humanities (see e.g. Assmann, 2007: 34).

Memory studies have grown considerably in past decades, establishing the journal *Memory Studies* (since 2008) and the Memory Studies Association (since 2016) as their platform. The unparalleled entrance of collective memory into the humanities and social sciences seemed to eclipse oral history research to the extent that oral historians felt the need to defend the core of their discipline, meaning the value of individual memory and the capacity of the individual to contest and critique cultural scripts and discourses (Green, 2004). On the other hand, memory studies scholars have reclaimed the return of the individual into collective memory (Crane, 1997), but have investigated traditionally cultural memories (Assmann, 2011), such as monuments, museums, national holidays, and textbooks. Academic monographs have only exceptionally tried to connect both (cf. Mark, 2010). Leading theorists in both fields have been scholars from Western Europe and the English speaking cultural world, as evidenced by a mere glance at the canonical readings in both fields (Perks, Thompson, 2016 for oral history; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, Levy, 2011 for memory studies).

Upon the collapse of communism, scholars from East Central Europe were disadvantaged in absorbing and accepting the ideas which had shaped Western intellectual thinking for decades. The communist regime urged the study of social classes and social structures: not memory, not subjectivities. Before 1989, research on the social contemporary history in countries in the Eastern bloc was done mainly by Western scholars (Kałwa, 2010). Which of these two disciplines took the leading role in revealing memories which were distorted, falsified, or simply made silent under the previous regime? What were the motives behind the uses of oral history and memory studies? Did memory scholars from the region profit from their native traditions or adopted Western methods and practices?

THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM AND ORAL HISTORY

The collapse of communism was backed up by an unprecedented memory wave. The need to rethink the past and retrieve it from ideologically distorted interpretations was accompanied by a surge of memory in private and public spaces alike. As observed by J. Mark (2010), the collapse of dictatorial regimes in Spain, Portugal, and Greece, and even the downfall of Nazi Germany, was not followed by such a tsunami of diverse memory practices as the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The culture of self-indulgence contributed to elevate memory as a primary framework of dealing with both the communist past and the communist version of history.

In the process of re-examination of the past and “reformulation of collective identities” (Bernhard, Kubik, 2014: 8), oral history played a pivotal role. Personal recollections were often the only accessible sources about events absent from the communist discourse on the past or about historical phenomena which were obscured by communist ideology. The history of the Holodomor in Ukraine, the 1956 revolution

in Hungary, or the 1968 invasion of the Armies of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia could be made out only thanks to oral sources (Kałwa, 2010). After the collapse of communism, a real explosion of various initiatives, academic as well as public, leading to the investigation of individual memories can be observed (for the Czech Republic cf. Mücke, 2017).

In many countries, the development of oral history has been primarily linked to the memory of communism, recording and preserving the memory of events that had not been permitted to be discussed aloud previously (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2017; Ursu, 2019). The fall of communism is therefore directly related to the rapid evolution of oral history. In the Czech Republic, the Institute of Contemporary History, founded at the beginning of 1990, collected interviews with the founders of the Civic forum, a political movement unifying dissident forces established during the Velvet Revolution. Other projects about the Velvet Revolution and other preceding events followed (Mücke, 2017).

In Romania, witness accounts of terror and repression were valued and former political prisoners emerged as the most coherent group remembering Romanian communism. In 1997, the Oral History Institute was founded at Babeş-Bolyai University and a Master's degree in oral history was introduced in Romania (Ursu, 2019).

Particularly in the Baltic countries, oral history projects appeared to investigate traumatic experience of the 20th century connected to the Second World War and mass deportations (Jaago, Kõresaar, Rahi, 2006; Kõresaar, Jõesalu, 2016).

In Poland, the first projects were initiated by the members of the former underground anti-communist opposition (which developed into the Karta Centre Foundation) and focused on oral accounts of inhabitants of the Polish borderlands, territories which were incorporated into the Soviet Union after WWII, Siberian deportees, and prisoners in gulags (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2017).

Oral history was indeed a political tool in retrieving the alternative memories of the communist period (Khanenko-Friesen, Grinchenko, 2015), but it also had an important legitimizing function in the context of rising liberal democracies. The shared goal of the projects was to accelerate anti-communist remembering. Oral history served to document political oppression and violence, and supported anti-communist opposition.

It has been argued that the first decade after 1989 was characterized by a “dislocation” of collective memories, not by their pluralization (Karge, 2010: 137). This reversal of memory led to the consideration of the communist period as “the darkest age” instead of the “most glorious period in national history” (Petrescu, Petrescu, 2014: 68), typically featuring a reversal of the liberating Soviet army as an occupying one. As observed by Ene Kõresaar and Kirsti Jõesalu (2016), these initiatives left a feeling that the only valued stories reflected the victims’ experiences of the Stalinist repression, while positive memories of ordinary life were labelled as distorted by Soviet ideology. According to Cristina Petrescu and Drago Petrescu (2014) this anti-communist tint has continued to today in Romania, and the politics of memory of the various Institutes of Memory that have popped up across the region collecting stories, meaning stories of oppression and trauma, leads to a similar feeling.

THE TRADITION OF ORAL HISTORY IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE AND ITS INSPIRATIONS AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM

Interviewing people about events obscured by communism has had a longer tradition. Already in the 1980s oral historians did pioneering work, some of them starting even earlier. In Russia, Irina Sherbakova began to collect interviews with Gulag Survivors, victims of Stalinism, in the 1970s (e.g. Sherbakova, 1992). Stalinist crimes became the topic of historical documentaries in Hungary in the 1980s, and interviews with Holocaust survivors were conducted semi-officially already at this time, despite the taboo of these events under communism (Laczo, Zombory, 2012). In Poland, oral history was practiced in the first half of the 1980s, including a collection of interviews with five formerly prominent Polish communists (Main, 2014). Collections of interviews with communist leaders, as well as opposition activists, were published in the 1980s abroad (in Polish).

In other countries, interviewing people developed within the framework imposed by the communist regime, privileging the communist heroes such as partisans and anti-fascist fighters. In Czechoslovakia, such work with witnesses had been popular since the 1960s (Vaněk, 2004). Interest in oral history, narrated autobiographies, biographies, and life stories started in Bulgaria in the early 1970s, and during the period of late socialism, the interest in qualitative methods included biographical interviews and in-depth interviews with various groups of people, such as painters (Baeva, Kabakchieva, 2014).

After the fall of the Eastern bloc, oral historians in East Central Europe drew inspiration from various sources. The German biographical method was popular in Poland, and only towards the end of the 1990s the first publications familiarizing Polish historians with oral history practiced in the USA and Britain began to appear (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2017). French sociologists, such as Daniel Bertaux, under the guidance of whom family narratives and family genealogies became collected, were inspirational for Bulgarian oral historians (Baeva, Kabakchieva, 2014). Popular life writing campaigns, sort of a distance oral history evoking romantic home nationalism started in Estonia, while in Latvia at approximately the same time the National Oral History project was organized, based exclusively on recorded interviews (Kõresaar, Jõesalu, 2016).

In the West, oral history has studied predominantly socially marginalized groups, in East Central Europe, oral history contributed to the promulgation of the new national memories. In spite of the boom of oral history in East Central Europe after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, oral history appears to have a longer tradition in this region; the first ventures started at least simultaneously as oral history projects which had developed in the West. This long East Central European tradition is however little recognized in the core volumes of global oral history, where the authors are almost exclusively Western authors.³ Before I proceed to tackle the two different approaches in dealing with native academic traditions, describing the attitudes of Czech oral history and Polish memory studies, the ways in which the concept “lieux de mémoire” has developed across East Central Europe will be explored.

3 The third edition of the fundamental reader for oral historians *Oral History Reader* involved only Western academics. Only one contribution concerns East Central Europe.

The term “lieux de mémoire”, coined by French historian Pierre Nora in his three-volume collection *Les Lieux de mémoire*, has evolved into the most successful concept of memory studies (Nora, 1984–1992). Drawing a clear distinction between history and memory, Nora summoned forty-five French historians to establish a catalogue of the sites selected by a rapidly disappearing French national memory as its incarnation. In spite of Nora’s reservations about the potential of this term for application outside of France, the *lieux de mémoire* spread quickly over Western Europe. It turned out to be an accessible and unifying “meta-concept” for historians who desired to partake in the rising turn towards memory (Majerus, 2014a: 157).

Nora didn’t write a traditional national history. His three volumes may be considered as a counter-project to traditional history writing, a history “au second degré” which reflects not what happened in the past, but how this past is narrated in the present. The *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory or realms of memory, are those sites people identify with and around which memory references develop. The paradigm has been used as a reference point for various national, transnational, regional, and local projects, and has also found resonance in popular publications and tourism. The first decade of the 21st century witnessed the veritable inflation of the *lieux de mémoire* achieving its imaginary peak with several European *lieux de mémoire* (e.g. Boer, Duchhardt, Kreis, Schmale, 2012).

East Central Europe however, appeared quite resistant to accepting the paradigm. In the Czech Republic, Antoine Marès, director of the Parisian Institut des Études Slaves, and expert on the contemporary history of Czechoslovakia, was worried about the fact that the idea of the *lieux de mémoire* had not still come to Central Europe in spite of its accession to the European Union in 2004, and proposed to include the *lieux de mémoire* in the framework of the activities of the Czech-Slovak-French commission of historians (Marès, 2009).⁴ The book was obviously intended for French readers, a fact evidenced by the impossibility of finding even a single copy of this collection in the Czech National Library in Prague (researched in March 2021).

As observed by Benoit Majerus (2014b), Western scholars initiated the *lieux de mémoire* projects in East Central Europe and in a way “colonised” this territory. While in Western Europe, particularly in France and Germany, the *lieux de mémoire* was not only an academic but also a public success with more than 100,000 copies sold in the French case, the *lieux de mémoire* in East Central Europe were promulgated by Western scholars and written for Western readers. Many of them have transmitted the vision of Western intellectuals on East Central Europe rather than the visions of the insiders. Symptomatically, the two-volume venture of the *lieux de mémoire russe* (Nivat, 2007), written in French, is again absent from the collections of the largest library in Russia, the Russian state library in Moscow (researched in March 2021).

B. Majerus (2014a) noticed that Germany was a leading country in initiating various transnational projects, suggesting that projects encompassing East Central Europe might reflect a rather German academic vision on the region. However, it has to be

4 In spite of its title, *Les Lieux de mémoire en Europe Centrale*, the collection includes almost exclusively memorial sites in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.

noted that the content of various collections titled as “East” or “Central” Europe often involved only a few countries of the region and in an uneven way. *Lieux de mémoire* of East Central Europe, published in German in 2011, were one third written by German scholars, and authors from the region included eight Polish scholars, three Hungarians, and only one researcher each representing Slovakia, Czech Republic and Ukraine (Weber, Olschowsky, Petranský, Pók, Przewoźnik, 2011–2012). Analogous with B. Majerus, we might ask if the *lieux de mémoire* of East Central Europe do not display a vision of only a few of these countries on the past.

In East Central Europe, no multi-volume projects on the *lieux de mémoire* equivalent to the French or German collections have been launched (see e.g. François, Schultze, 2001), only monographs on various separate phenomena appeared. The memory of communism has not been the primary target of these publications, rather various historical events and their reflections in historiography or public spaces have been provided. The only exception is Poland, with a particularly valued bilateral approach on shared and parallel German-Polish *lieux de mémoire* (Hahn, Traba, 2011–2015).

What are the causes of the rather unsuccessful story of the *lieux de mémoire* in East Central Europe? Polish scholars Maciej Górny and Kornélia Kończal (2016) have argued that a purely linguistic aspect might play a role. The term itself is understood in its topographical sense of the word rather than in its imaginative and symbolic force and therefore associated frequently with “monuments” or even cemeteries (for similar statements about topographical understanding regarding Slovakia cf. Kurhajcová, 2012; for the Czech Republic cf. Smyčka, Antošíková, 2015). The second reason is linked to the regional politics of memory. In most countries of Eastern Europe, the institutes of national memory have monopolized the very notion of memory. It's very hard to make another memory narrative influential. Moreover, East Central Europe is a decentralized territory with many conflicting, rather than unifying, memories. Lastly, East Central European countries have very quickly abandoned their own memory-related concepts and left the space open for Western European paradigms. As a consequence, inspiration is sought in American, French, and German scholarship and not in local traditions. A more systematic exploration of local research traditions is needed to decide if East Central Europe has indeed developed concepts which lay parallel to Western collective memory. For the moment, Polish memory researchers have advanced their native concept of historical consciousness as analogous to collective memory.

FORGOTTEN TRADITIONS OR NEW CONSTRUCTIONS? HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS VERSUS COLLECTIVE MEMORY, POLISH AND CZECH APPROACHES

Recently, Polish scholars have argued that East Central European scholars had been interested in memory issues long before the memory boom was identified in Western Europe and the USA (cf. Kiliyas, 2013; Kończal, Wawrzyniak, 2018; Pakier, Wawrzyniak, 2013; Tarkowska, 2013). The terms of historical consciousness, historical awareness, and other related concepts have moved forward as parallels to the Western concept of collective memory and sometimes indeed as identical paradigms (Main, 2014). The Polish predecessors of collective memory, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula and Barbara Szacka,

were interested in the issues of collective memory already at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵

In the Czech context, historical consciousness was explored by historian Miroslav Hroch (1976) but interestingly, this research tradition is not presented as parallel to collective memory in Czech research context, unlike in the case of Polish research.

Rather, Smyčka and Antošíková (2015) have asserted that the new concept of collective memory didn't replace old concepts of historical consciousness in the Czech context, as it has been suggested in the Polish case. Both terms coexist in Czech historiographical writing. Hroch is one of the strongest opponents of "memory"; the historian states that memory is only a "fashionable word" which "occupies a more important place that would correspond to its content" (Hroch, 2015: 46). Together with the lived historical experience, ideological interpretation of history and historiography, collective memory is only one of four components of historical consciousness, perceived by Hroch as a broader concept. Identically, Hroch is critical towards the term *lieux de mémoire*, attributing to it only limited historical value.

Olšáková (2012) has found a very modest reflection of the concept of collective memory in Czech historical writing. Czech historiographical tradition is rather continuous, including using the phenomenon of the "second life" which goes back to the 1970s. Similarly, the *lieux de mémoire* was adapted to the Czech tradition in addressing the myths and the distorted representations of the past, and not the deconstructivist aspects of memory as were the intentions of Nora (Smyčka, 2012). It is noticeable that collections on "East Central" European memory hardly ever include a chapter written by a Czech historian about a Czech "collective memory." A vigorous native tradition of historical consciousness and the examination of the "second life" of historical localities, personalities, and events have generated continuity rather than a break with past traditions. If this is the cause of the practically non-existent contribution of Czech historians to the field of memory studies, is yet to be explored.

ORAL HISTORY BETWEEN OLD TRADITION AND NEW METHOD: CZECH WORK WITH WITNESSES

In 1999 oral history was introduced to the Czech audience for the first time, to the collection of interviews with students-participants of the student demonstration on 17 November 1989, which was suppressed violently by the communist riot police forces, triggering the Velvet Revolution (Otáhal, Vaněk, 1999: 31–44). Vaněk emphasized the uniqueness of the new method in sharing individual perspectives on the past. According to the subsequent publications produced by Czech oral historians, "real" oral history came to the Czech milieu only "after the fall of the Iron Curtain, of the communist regime, the reintroduction of the freedom of speech and free research in 1989" (Vaněk, Mücke, 2011: 80). There was a "prehistoric" phase, positivist work with witnesses, practiced in the 1960s and 1970s, but this phase has nothing to do with how

5 Research on historical consciousness developed in the 1960s and 1970s also in the West, in Germany, USA and other countries, particularly in the works of Reinhart Koselleck, Hannah Arendt and Hans-Georg Gadamer. I thank an anonymous reviewer to turn my attention to this point.

oral history has been done since 1989 (cf. Vaněk, 2019: 9). Unlike Polish memory scholars, Czech oral historians rejected any idea of continuity with anything associated with the communist regime. Oral history became a political tool of anti-communism not only in its content, but also in the very organization of oral history as a discipline which had to be associated with democracy and freedom. In spite of a slightly denouncing tone with which the “work with witnesses” is noted in Czech oral history publications aimed at the public, in his 2004 monograph, M. Vaněk (pp. 40–47) described a methodological brochure about oral history, published in 1967,⁶ as surprisingly modern and “in many ways innovative.” Two years before Portelli, he emphasized, the brochure tackled the ways memory works in the oral history interview. He was even ready to consider its legacy for contemporary oral history, though in a critical way. These reflections being an exception, no continuity with “work with witnesses” has been depicted since.

A similar process can be observed in other East European countries. In the 1970s and 1980s, Soviet researchers isolated from Western intellectual influences developed their own methods and techniques for conducting interviews and reflections upon research areas within which oral accounts could be used (Melnikova, 2006). All was quickly forgotten with the fall of the Iron Curtain. Soviet historiography lost its value, and according to Melnikova none of the theoretical frameworks elaborated during Soviet times are popular or even used today. Oral history was created in the 1990s and exclusively Western literature is quoted in the works of younger generations. Theories and practices of oral history in Russia correspond in totality to the tendencies of global oral history (Rostovcev, 2018).

In Hungary, the 1990s brought an intense wave of reception and internationalisation (Laczo, Zombory, 2012). Contemporary Hungarian memory scholars don't find inspirational sources in their local traditions but look rather outside the region. In Slovakia, the fall of communism was connected with expectations not only to reflect critically on communism, but to “catch up with European scholarship” (Kurhajcová, 2012).

Czech oral history and Polish memory studies have developed two different approaches towards their communist heritage. Polish memory scholars have recently emphasized their own research tradition and their contribution to the memory studies' field. Czech oral historians started to build oral history after the collapse of the Berlin Wall through the perspectives of Western approaches. In spite of the remarkable achievements of Czech oral history — such as the presidency of the International Oral history association by M. Vaněk in 2010–2012 — Czech oral history publications cannot pretend to comprise the core of the discipline. Polish memory scholars have succeeded in dominating the territory of memory studies in East Central Europe, publishing several volumes on East Central Europe, including the Polish-German *lieux de mémoire*.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, particularly Central European countries were driven by the idea of a “return to Europe”, expressing their distancing from Russia, promoted by many Czech, Hungarian, and Polish dissidents. Returning to Europe — politically, economically, socially, culturally, and academically — was

6 The brochure was published in the year that opened the way to the “Prague spring”, a period of political liberalization in the Czech Republic (Myška, Zámečník, Holá, 1967). The brochure emphasized that recollections are subjective and need to be complemented with other historical sources.

connected with the rejection of concepts developed by communist oral historians in what was then Czechoslovakia. The quest for a new memory and new identity (Kopeček, 2008) was associated with adapting the theories, methods, and topics used in the West, particularly in younger generations. On the other hand, “from the outset, Central European states were expected to ‘internalize’ the Western set of norms and values, rather than modifying or transforming them” (Van der Poel, 2019: 3). The efforts of Polish researchers to contribute to the field of memory studies initiated in the West can be considered as a return to Europe *au second degré*, by promoting native traditions of historical consciousness and equalizing them with the Western ones.

CONCLUSION

In East Central Europe, oral history played a pivotal role in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Retrieving memories obscured by the communist regime, oral history documented the oppressive and traumatic aspects of the communist era and, in general, of a past that had been interpreted through an ideological lens. In spite of being practiced in the region in the 1970s and 1980s — albeit in some countries as ideologically supported work with witnesses, oral history, promoting subjective experiences, was introduced as an entirely new discipline according to the Western criteria after the collapse of communism.

Memory studies and its most successful concept, the *lieux de mémoire*, were implemented in the region later, from the first decade of the 21st century onwards with ambivalent success. The promoters of the *lieux de mémoire* were predominantly Western scholars writing their *lieux de mémoire* for a Western audience, not for the insiders, with the exception of the Polish-German *lieux de mémoire*. Unlike in the Czech Republic, Polish memory scholars have promoted their own native memory traditions as comparable to the Western paradigms, such as the concept of historical consciousness.

Both processes; the rejection of the patterns developed under communism (Czech oral history) and the promotion of native traditions (Polish memory studies) can be included in the process of the “return to Europe.” Further and more complex research is needed to understand how East Central European scholars work with their own traditions and to what degree they imitate concepts developed in the West. Certainly, East Central Europe have to be conceptualized as a space of varied, complicated, and even opposing approaches to oral history and memory studies.

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