Introduction

Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past
by David Gaunt and Tora Lane

I told myself: That's that. People don't want to go to war museums anymore. They don't want to hear about the siege of Leningrad, and that goes for Stalin's prison camps. It is tiresome. And the personal memories of the whole family being captured and no one coming back, those you must hide away and never tell anyone. 

Natalia Tolstaya

This regional report initiates a planned series of reports on the social and political situation of Eastern Europe by scholars affiliated with the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University. This first report focuses mainly on constructions or reconstructions of national historical memory and instrumentalizations of the past, which over recent decades has become a fiercely debated topic throughout the region, and subject of much scholarly research.

The widespread phenomenon of government commemorative politics includes the creation of historical commissions and institutions, legislating politicized interpretations of historical events, establishing new museums of national trauma, even getting into international conflicts over interpretations of history, sponsoring history textbooks for schools, erecting statues to national heroes, and instituting new days of national commemoration. Despite the authenticity of Natalya Tolstaya's everyday-life observation of public disinterest in memorialization quoted above, and Yuliya Yurchuk's finding that nearly all passers-by in Ukraine had no idea of just who was portrayed in historical monuments or why, new monuments, museums and historical truth commissions have been established throughout the region. Now there even exist guide books for tourists aiming to visit sites of massacres and mass extinction. In many countries a gap exists between the memorial policies of the government and political elite in contrast with popular remembrance of the past, neither of which need to be based on facts. An astute Polish sociologist, Sławomir Kapralski, writes of a split between political forms of commemoration and popular memory, that particularly affects Holocaust discourse.

Some major actors can be identified: one, already mentioned, is the governments and political elites who desire to establish a worldview perspective showing the successful mastering of past events, the intention being to develop a triumphant continuity of events that can be officially sanctioned through government agencies. A case in point would be the canonization of the Bulgarian revolutionary Vasil Levski, a revolutionary of little impact, as the prime martyr for Bulgarian freedom. Sometimes these national constructs clash as when a high-profile joint historical commission between North Macedonia and Bulgaria floundered upon the impossibility of deciding whether Gotse Delchev, a revolutionary born in a border region, was a Bulgarian or Macedonian hero, leading to diplomatic conflicts spilling over into completely different issues.

Other types of actors in creation of public memory are representatives of minorities, usually ethnic/religious/gendered, desiring political recognition of or
compensation for past injustices or traumas, or demanding a proper place in the national narrative about the past. Take for instance the urge to universalize the Jewish Holocaust and a similar campaign among Roma activists for more general recognition of their World War II genocide.

A large mass of writings can be categorized as “witness literature” that, although sometimes fictional, has considerable authenticity because of the suffering of the authors, such as Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Imre Kertesz, and Hédi Fried. In recent decades large collections of witness statements and video interviews have been deposited in universities or research institutes. Institutions now exist for educational “memory work” to combat xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-gypsyism, racism, and anti-HBTQ positions. Democratic governments have been pressured to apologize for abuses and violence committed in the past. Formal apologies have been extended to many minorities and colonized peoples in a spirit that the author Wole Soyinka terms mea culpaism. Connected with this are academics examining, debating or joining either on one side or the other of conflicts about the past, or those who recognize injustices committed by empires or colonial structures that suppressed the human rights of peoples.

And the new versions of the past also form new ways to engage citizens. Non-government organizations, often representing suppressed or persecuted groups, also participate in the demand for their own historical narratives and new forms of commemoration, even their own museums and school-books, and are occasionally financed (and thus controlled) by the state; sometimes however they are combated or rejected by governments. Many of these battles over the past go on inside political and social elites while citizens stand by, but the latter are expected to become politically mobilized and aware of the nation’s long-standing historical importance. In the wording of Charles S. Maier there can be a “surfeit” of memory.

Conflicting memories of the past have a long tradition. During travels in Yugoslavia in 1937 writer Rebecca West was taken by different people through difficult terrain to obscure places where small chapels held ancient manuscripts. Depending on the lettering of the manuscripts – Latin, Cyrillic or Ottoman – her guides emphatically maintained that this proved that just their group settled here first and thus had the best claim to build a national-state in the surrounding country. Even though other ethnicities lived there now, they were latecomers and outsiders with no legitimate claim and needed to be removed. Each ethnicity in multicultural Yugoslavia maintained their own exclusive view of the past and why they lived where they lived, leading finally to the breakdown of Yugoslavia as a country.

We are thus dealing with an old phenomenon – the re-interpretation of historical events for political reasons – in a new form – that of the political manipulation of memory and remembrance. Historians are used to changing perceptions of the past. Pieter Geyl showed how the appreciation of Napoleon varied depending on France’s political shifts from republic to empire and back; Herbert Butterfield identified the dominant British historical narrative as strengthening the liberal political view of the inevitable movement towards increasing democracy and enlightenment.

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So, is this more recent interest in re-interpreting the past a case of new wine into old bottles or old wine into new bottles? What does this transformation say about contemporary politics in Eastern Europe? Can we say with certainty that the phenomenon of manipulation of the past or the need to rectify historical injustice is today more prevalent and pernicious in Eastern Europe than ever before?

Readers of Orwell’s 1984 will recall that the protagonist Winston Smith worked at the Ministry of Truth in something very similar to the University of London’s Senate building. There were many other ministries: the Ministry of Peace dealt with war, the Ministry of Love dealt with torture, the Ministry of Plenty dealt with starvation and finally the Ministry of Truth that was responsible for the “necessary” falsification of historical events. In line with Orwell’s critical reasoning we could consider institutions claiming to concern National Remembrance rather to be about National Forgetfulness or National Amnesia. Any way you look at organizations of that type, they appear much more to underline the national and much less to deal with uncovering the past.

We have many examples in this regional report on remembrance in Eastern Europe of Nazi and communist totalitarianism, particularly in those countries that are
closely associated with the Visegrad group and institutions linked to the Platform of European Memory and Conscience. This platform promotes a narrative of the past written from the perspective of post-communist Europe, that rather makes people unconscious of the truth of which they can no longer have any direct experience.

In the politics or wars of memory that are taking place in particular in the former countries of the Eastern bloc, one can see how memory has penetrated right to the core of the political problems and the problems of politics of our time. The widespread “memory boom”, dating approximately from the 1990s and still growing, features a large interest in different forms of memories, reminiscences and commemorations as well in historical documents and other forms of documentations. For over a decade we have seen an increase in memory conflicts in terms of memory politics and memory wars, in particular in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Besides the memory of communism itself, it is in particular the “memory” of the Second World War that causes fierce debates, and there are many reasons for this in this part of Europe. But besides apparent historical and geographical aspects, as Eastern Europe was arguably the deadliest battle line of the world war with the greatest number of victims and the most atrocious crimes against humanity, recent memory conflicts show that there are also ideological and cultural issues linked to the very notion of ‘memory’ and its status in Eastern Europe today.

As French historian Pierre Nora, one of the main theorists of memory, noted in 1989, contemporary memory discourses are not primarily about memory, but rather about interpreting history. He writes: “The quest for memory is the search for one's history.” And the field of memory, he adds, has become that of historiography, which is not to say that it is more true. ‘Memory’ denotes an in-between field, a grey zone between different forms of remembering, commemorating and otherwise addressing the past in the private and in the public sphere. What the field or discourse of memory primarily deals with has been the personal experience of real historical events and how it affects our understanding and narratives of history (as opposed for instance to the forms of the art of memory or memorization in ancient, medieval and Renaissance times). But since personal and private experiences interfere with the larger and supra-personal public forms of history writing, in particular in the official sphere, this field of ‘memory’ has proven to be problematic. And memory politics has opened a Pandora’s box, where past conflicts resurge as conflicts over the past. The specters of European communism seem to find no rest in their graves, but is it not because we are troubling them with a new meta-perspective that implies an instance of revisionism? Is there any narrative, or is there any other form of settling accounts with the past that could bring them peace?

In the period of perestroika and especially after the fall of the Berlin wall, discourses of memory in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe took the form of emancipatory movements, allowing people to express long repressed truths, debunking the politicized historical narrative of the communist regimes, and contributing to its black book. Finally, through the mouths of its citizens one would hear of the crimes committed by the communists towards individuals, regions and nations. It was considered a civil right. And indeed, there were many truths to be told, in particular since history played a crucial role in Soviet culture. Not only does the Soviet narrative of history start with the October Revolution; history in terms of dialectical materialism also provided legitimization to the new state and its political consciousness was based on a theory of history.

It is perhaps therefore no wonder that the Soviet legacy expressed in official and public culture shows a predilection for grand and ritualized historical narratives, monuments and parades. It was proud of its past, and it celebrated it, first in the form of the revolution as the victory over capitalist bourgeois society, and second in World War II as the victory over fascism and the Soviet Union’s entry into global great power politics. In the Soviet Union, history as grand narrative and teleology probably reached its apex. But to the extent that this history also involved the memory of the sacrifices of its masses, it was replete with censorship and suppressed stories of contradictory or contradicting events, and in particular, events that would question the historical political claim of being the victory over fascism.

Soviet monumental culture was ultimately challenged through a concomitant privatization of historical ex-
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experience and history writing in the form of individual, collective and national recollections or commemorations of the past that are also vested with the task of critically scrutinizing the former official narratives of history. It is conceivable that history, especially post-totalitarian history, has made us wiser. There was also a moral aspect, which translated the German call for Vergangenheitsbewältigung or Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit, that is the need for Germany to deal with the past so that the crimes committed by the Nazi regime would never be possible again, into the context of European communism. The appeal to deal with the past was based on the Freudian psychological theory of the need to deal with a repressed experience of the past. It applies to singular personal experiences of traumas of the past in Eastern Europe, as Florence Fröhlig shows, but it has proven problematic when transposed into a political or otherwise collective and supra-personal theory of memory. In particular, as it can be difficult to distinguish the victims from the perpetrators when it comes to traumas of the communist past. As the documentary work of Svetlana Aleksievich illustrated, many people became victims precisely because of their engagement with the Soviet history of communism. In her 1986 book The Unwomanly Face of War, it is the women of the hero-people (geroi-narod) that were forced into traumatic sacrifices and sufferings. And not only that; they also lived a life of deep, but of course also not unproblematic, pride over their personal commitment in a sense that later would be deemed as sovkovost’, that is, as Soviet mentality.

All this points toward other reasons why the in-between sphere of mediation between different forms of remembrance and different historical narratives has become a conflict zone not just of perspectives, but also political and economic interests. In the redemptive and liberating role of settling accounts with a past replete with complex ideological oppositions, the memory of the actual experience sometimes seems irreconcilable with current democratic and/or liberal ideals. As Barbara Törnquist-Plewa writes in her contribution, from memory as the testimony of the truth of the past and the right to express it, and a form of dealing with trauma, the discourse became tasked with the role of reconciling the nation in several Eastern European countries. But already, primarily due to the nationalist turn, the urge to “own” the past was not without power politics, and one could pose the question of how liberal society could be tasked with settling accounts with a past of a different historical and political engagement. According to “European memory”, as proclaimed by the European Union, “the totalitarian past must be condemned and truth restored”. And the Declaration on European Conscience and Communism (2006), calls for:

reaching an all-European understanding that both the Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes each to be judged by their own terrible merits to be destructive in their policies of systematically applying extreme forms of terror, suppressing all civic and human liberties, starting aggressive wars and, as an inseparable part of their ideologies, exterminating and deporting whole nations and groups of population; and that as such they should be considered to be the main disasters which blighted the 20th century.

The declaration in itself is both political and Eurocentric, and besides the problem of putting equal signs on all points of accusation, from today’s perspective, there is a case for arguing that ecological disasters ought to be included under the term “main disasters”. More important, dealing with the past is also a form of settling political accounts with the past. Still, what perhaps concerns Eastern Europe with regards to its memory in the most acute way is, as Yulia Yurchuk’s contribution about memory in Ukraine shows, how the problem of the memory of the opposition and fight between the two totalitarian regimes on Ukrainian ground during the World War II now resurges as the opposition of memory in the context of the war between Ukraine and pro-Russian forces.

In Ukraine, proto-fascist or Nazi sympathizers have been heroized for their opposition to Soviet (Russian) Communism, which by reverse legitimized the latter’s warfare as the fight against Fascism, including the separatist Ukrainian movement. This is perhaps one of the most apparent instances of how the historical opposition echoes in political conflicts today. And it also shows how the memory of private experiences and public commemorations, the memory of this historical moment, can resurface in current politics as indications of a nationalist turn in certain post-Soviet countries.

This is not only the case with Ukraine, but also Belarus’, Poland, Lithuania and others, as the contributions show. And again, it brings us back to the notion of memory as this mediating sphere between public commemorations and private experiences of history, and the
question if there is not also a revisionist moment in the way that politics is being done or undone in its relation to history.

How can we understand this shift in the very form of history writing? From the point of view of scholarship: does the shift away from traditional historiographical discourses between historians to investigating high-level “memory politics” engaging NGOs and political power holders bring any new insight? Yes, but not on the past events they use as a starting point; rather, such study reveals how discourse about the past locks into everyday party politics. Privatizing the past has become a form of appropriation of the grand narratives, not a critique of them. Thus, several discussions presented here aim at explaining the “usefulness” of memory in the form of falsified, manipulated, or weaponized history for politics in countries that are democratic in the sense of needing to mobilize voters at elections, by arguing that historical facts in some way humiliates them as a collective, as a nation, and therefore must be suppressed for the sake of the nation’s honor which can only be redeemed through lying about what really happened.

What characterizes CBEES’ status of the region report is a critical, broad and multidisciplinary approach to the topic. Several contributors are historians, but there are also social and cultural scientists, some engaged in memory activism through their work. We seek to give an overview of different issues of history and memory that are at stake, and different actors and institutions involved in the production of memory, the development of memory culture and politics of memory in Central and Eastern Europe today. We will look at the dynamics of its form of dealing with the past as memory, trauma and/or political conflicts as well as the more recent trends of instrumentalization and use and abuse of memory issues in political conflicts. It is important to examine the how, how memory is constructed and/or instrumentalized, but also to examine how it affects the what, and the way that the two are interconnected. What is remembered in private memories is not only the private, but also the national and political, since they were connected in the Soviet times, and they remain so for that very reason until today. Discharging memory from history and politics is impossible (and the reverse), and therefore, instead of calling for or arguing for a de-politicization of memory, we ought, in the accounts of the politics of memory, ask how the memory of politics works in contemporary memory and what the forms or anti-forms of this memory are.

Memory is not a thing, but rather is a relationship between the person/institution/collective/state ministry thinking about how to use the past in a way beneficial to it, thus deeming it necessary. The use of memory is multi-faceted and multi-levelled. It is very important to identify the persons/groups/political parties that are making the representations. Here Anna Bikont’s investigative report from the reaction of Jedwabne’s residents to the news (well known to themselves) that Polish civilians willingly killed Jewish neighbors. From a journalist-psychologist perspective, she uncovers the who, when and methods of creating untruths about the Polish populations murdering their neighbors in Jedwabne and other small towns in 1941 – and also how others in the community have been permanently silenced by the perpetrators, and how for various reasons priests and some nationalist historians join in as cheer-leaders for denialism.17

Popular misrepresentation, abuse of and lying about past events has a long history. Historians used to call such misrepresentations myths or legends not worth a second thought. Only recently have scholars come to deal with these misrepresentations through serious research. An ethical reason is the thought that behind some of the unproven statements about the past, one can find substantial truths about what has happened to repressed minorities or discriminated groups and these therefore need to be re-discovered hand in hand with members of these groups. This latter type of memory study can be very disruptive – as in the case of Jan Gross’s book on the role of Poles in the Jedwabne massacre.

From the view of governments and of the agencies and Institutions dependent on them, memory/remembrance/commemoration work becomes a routine process of selection, exclusion, hegemony, and repression. That is to say, good-old-fashioned power politics. It is conceivable that the rise of interest in using history is a result of the death of the grand narratives of political ideologies. Instead of mobilization through ideology, mobilization is made through creating and maintaining unique national
identities formed by history into a story of long-standing victimhood or heroism or martyrdom. Thus, a politicized master memory narrative in the eyes of its adherents transforms into a quasi-religious standpoint that can tolerate no doubt and those who dare to doubt are treated as heretics.

Although master narratives of remembrance strive towards absolute dominance, some are quite happy with merely causing confusion and uncertainty about the facts. This plays into the increased higher education among the population as academic education teaches students to be open to multiple interpretations and treat them with equal interest. An important aspect of making remembrance or commemoration into an ideology is the building of barriers between the conflicting interpretations. In this way the contours of memory are shaped more by what it is against and what it hates and less by what it on the surface stands for and adores. In this way the study of memory-work refers not to official remembering, but concerns the consequences in the form of forgetting, silencing, suppressing, repressing. Future research should focus on the barriers between interpretations rather than the description of what the various interpretations and representations contain.

From the historical perspective, memory cannot perform a redemptive task vis-à-vis the past, but it must remain truthful to its aporetic character: to all the paradoxes, disgraces and irreconcilable conflicts that it entails. Only thus can we get away from a politics of the past and understand the role of politics in the past and the past in politics in this region.

References

2. Yulia Yurchuk, Reordering of Meaningful Words: Memory of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine (Stockholm University, 2014).
10. Or, as Raphael Samuel argued in *Theatres of Memory*: the notion of history needs to be expanded so as to include an understanding of the popular forms of invoking the past today.
14. This is perhaps even more visible in *Time: Second hand*, which deals more directly with the experience of everyday communism after the war.
15. See for instance Platform of European Memory and Conscience: https://www.memoryandconscience.eu/