Małgorzata Pakier & Joanna Wawrzyniak (eds.).
Memory and change in Europe: Eastern perspectives

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REFERENCES


1 Memory and Change in Europe: Eastern Perspectives is a diverse collection of essays emerging from two conferences held as part of the “Genealogies of Memory in Central and Eastern Europe” programme organized under the auspices of the European Network of Remembrance and Solidarity. Each of the sixteen chapters approaches the familiar topic of European memory and identity, but with a specific focus on the perspective of one or more Eastern European countries. This is particularly important, the volume editors argue, because Eastern European memories challenge existing concepts and theories within memory studies that are often constructed from a Western European perspective. On the other hand, the tools of memory studies can be used to critically assess models of European identity that ascribe uniqueness to Eastern Europe on the basis of its history. One of the core aims of the volume is to “provide a view on Europeanization from the perspective of East Europeans, and of their transformation from a peripheral status to one of the central subjects in the current debate on European history and memory” (5). The volume lays claim to multidisciplinarity, bringing together historians, sociologists and anthropologists.

2 Following an introduction by the editors, the volume is divided into three sections. In the first of these, “Memory Dialogues and Monologues”, Aleida Assmann and Andrzej Nowak approach the debate surrounding European memory from two very different
perspectives. Assmann considers the “transformative power of memory” in two distinct dimensions: firstly, the power of memory to change people, societies and states, and secondly the ways in which memory itself is transformed. She argues that there has been a global shift from a “modernist” to a “moralist” perspective in memory, that is, from a focus on the future towards an insistence on engagement with traumatic histories in order to work through and overcome them. This, Assmann argues, can also be seen as a movement from a monologic to a dialogic memory culture that takes into account the perspective of the other and acknowledges violence inflicted, as well as violence suffered. Assmann’s chapter contains a normative dimension in that she sees dialogic memory as an essential underpinning of both democratic transformation and European (cultural) integration.

It is in many ways this normative aspect of Assmann’s argument to which Nowak responds in the subsequent chapter. Nowak analyzes the debate about European memory in the framework of “political correctness”, that is, if and how certain (Eastern) public memory constructions have “become objects of prescriptive regulations and prescriptive models” (38). He notes that it is not only nation states, but also transnational organizations such as the European Union, that have a role in creating the powerful narratives that can determine if and what societies remember. He argues that the institutional remembering prescribed by the EU risks “undermining the divergence of memorial realities – of different experiences in different social and cultural groups” (52). The divergent memories are often those emerging from Eastern European countries and yet the models of memory are based on the consensus reached by Western European countries in the period of division.

This latter theme – the implications of “Western” models of memory being applied to Eastern Europe – is picked up by several of the subsequent chapters and can be seen as one of the core contributions of the volume to memory studies more broadly. Part II, “Eastern Europe as a (Unique) Memory Framework?”, is comprised of three essays. Maciej Górny and Kornelia Kończal consider why Pierre Nora’s concept of lieux de mémoire (which has enjoyed enormous success in Western Europe) has not “travelled” as well to Central and Eastern European countries. In their conclusions, they point not only towards reasons behind the relative absence of Nora’s model in Central and Eastern European contexts, but also towards ways in which the study of Central and Eastern Europe can stimulate a rethinking of the concept that goes beyond the focus on a single nation.

In the second essay, focusing on memory of the atrocities committed against the Roma and Sinti during World War II, Sławomir Kapralski challenges the idea of the “special nature” of Eastern European memory by showing that the same narratives have appeared in Western and Eastern memory cultures albeit at different times. The final essay in this section, authored by Kaja Kaźmierska, demonstrates some of the connections between biographical and collective memory of the “Great Patriotic War” in the former Polish Eastern Borderlands (Kresy) and explains these connections using the concepts of symmetry and asymmetry. In symmetrical remembering the biographical and collective narratives complement one another; in asymmetrical remembering they are opposed. In line with the previous essays in this section, Kaźmierska argues that the binary vision of a “Western” versus a “non-Western” way of remembering and building (national) identity has influenced perceptions of memory.
in Central and Eastern Europe in a way that sets up a “distinction between civic (Western) and ethnic (Eastern) nationalism” (109).

6 In the first essay of the next section, Joanna Beata Michlic takes a similarly broad approach in her analysis of the evolution of Holocaust memory in post-communist Europe. She traces stages in the process of “bringing the dark to light” (as the title of the chapter puts it) and concludes ultimately that, while cultural heritage and tradition continue to exert a significant influence over national identity, memory and history, global pressures and international (Western) memory cultures can have a transformative effect. Lidia Zessin-Jurek also considers the interaction between different ways of approaching memory of Europe’s twentieth century in her discussion of lobbying for “Gulag memory” via European institutions. She explores whether memory of the Gulag can unite Central and Eastern European societies into a “community of memory” (134) with a regional focus. She concludes that – after struggles to assert what was perceived as a nationalist or exclusivist approach – it was transnational cooperation between Eastern European activists within the European institutions which allowed memory of the Gulag to emerge as an important European lieu de mémoire.

7 Following these six opening chapters, each of which speaks both to scholars with a specific regional interest and those working on the construction (or absence) of European memories more generally, the remainder of the volume tends towards a case-study approach. In the remaining essays in Part III, Stanisław Tyszka explores property restitution in the Czech Republic and Poland, including an interesting discussion of the impact of law on public remembering; Tatiana Zhurzhenko looks at memory of the “Great Patriotic War” in the Ukrainian-Russian Borderlands; Georgiy Kasianov considers memory politics in Ukraine; and Judy Brown presents her innovative methodology of “walking memory” in the context of the city of Sevastopol.

8 Part IV is similarly focused on specific examples of memory work in the region. Piotr Tadeusz Kwiatkowski analyses memory of World War II in contemporary Poland; Jacek Chróbczyński and Piotr Trojański consider memory of Auschwitz and Katyn in communist Poland; Matthias Weber explores Germans in Eastern Europe as a transnational site of memory; Yana Yancheva presents vernacular memory of collectivization in two different Bulgarian towns; and Claudia-Florentina Dobre explores the politicization of memory in post-communist Bulgaria and Romania.

9 Overall, the volume is remarkably coherent given the diversity of the essays included. Moreover, the individual chapters speak to one another in ways which allow the reader to draw broader conclusions. As indicated above, the volume’s most substantial contribution is the way in which it draws our attention to the ideological frameworks that inform our study of memory, which for the most part remain unspoken and unacknowledged. In particular, the collection highlights the fact that many (or perhaps even most) memory studies scholars tend to write from a normative position of post-nationalism and post-modernism. Several of the chapters do this explicitly by showing the ways in which concepts of Central and Eastern Europe continue to be inflected by centuries-old images of the region as the West’s exotic and backward “other”. Other chapters use empirical work on a specific case study to show how study of memory in the region can reflect back on the field as a whole. As the editors note, this challenge to memory studies comes largely (although not exclusively) from the perspective of “insiders” in the Central and Eastern European context (4) and is an important and
timely reminder of the ways in which our (national, cultural, social) position constructs our ways of seeing. In this way, the volume functions as a corrective and an important contribution to the rapidly growing body of work that attempts to deal with the idea of a European community constructed on the basis of a common history.

My principal criticism of the volume relates, however, to this very specificity. Despite its attempt to look at the region as a whole, there is a clear emphasis on two national contexts in particular: Ukraine and Poland. Beyond the final two chapters, there is little discussion of the Balkans and almost none of the Baltic States. The reader might, therefore, wonder if there is something particular about these two national contexts upon which the volume builds its argument. The second focus is a disciplinary one. Although the contributors are drawn from several “home” disciplines, the frameworks of history appear to be dominant, something also reflected in the publication of the book in Berghahn’s “Studies in Contemporary European History”. While this approach most certainly yields some important and interesting insights, there is a tendency in some of the chapters towards descriptive narrative and/or a positivist approach to the past (for example, ideas of “false”, “distorted” and “manipulated” history), which might jar with the constructivist ontology of the majority of memory studies.

Putting aside these reservations, Memory and Change in Europe does exactly as promised on the cover: it provides Eastern perspectives on the ever urgent questions of European memory, the relationship between the individual and the collective in interpretations of the past, and the interaction between the “self” and “other” in national and transnational histories.

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