

PASSERINI, LUISA, special editor. *Memory and Totalitarianism*. International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. ix + 209 pages. Cloth £30.00; ISBN 0-19-820248-2.

This volume represents the joining of two journals, *Life Stories/Récits de vie* (Europe) and the *International Journal of Oral History* (North America), into a new yearbook that will be published by Oxford University Press. If subsequent volumes are as well done as this one, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists — indeed, all scholars interested in international and interdisciplinary research on oral history — will be well served. Folklorists whose research includes theories of memory and transmission will certainly want to read the ten studies and the four review articles. All publications will be in English, though the original studies may be from other languages — this first volume includes studies that were originally in German, Russian, and Italian, and reviews of works originally in French and Spanish. There will be a Euro-American focus, apparently; although there is no editorial statement to this effect, we find that the extensive editorial board has only two representatives from Africa and Asia. The editors have already announced the themes of the next two volumes: “Cultural Transmission between Generations” and “Migration and Identity.”

The volume includes an introduction by the special editor, Luisa Passerini, and nine studies of memories associated with twentieth-century totalitarian regimes in Europe. Four deal with Germany, two with the Soviet Union, one with Hungary, one with Spain, and one with Holland. In addition to these lengthy treatments there are four review articles: “Italian Fascism,” “Life in Vichy France,” “Oral History in Russia,” and “Oral History in Germany.” A review section, with pieces on books from France, Italy, Bolivia, Columbia, and Poland, reflects the volume’s journalistic background. In spite of the international origins of the studies, many of which had to be translated, language errors in the book are so few as to be negligible: misspelling “combat” (79), missing verb “which that” (156) and missing article “moved house” (157). The text is a challenging mix of oral histories and probing theoretical questions on their significance within the context of the various kinds of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, including National Socialism in Germany, Stalinism in the USSR, and Fascism in Italy, all of which receive detailed treatment.

I was fascinated by the wide array of examples in the book and with the variety of analyses offered by the respective authors, though gradually it became apparent that common threads unite the individual articles. I was also struck by the consistent pattern of difficulty that the researchers had in extracting memories, memories that had been suppressed exactly because they were so closely associated with the political happenings of the time.

Even readers familiar with oral history studies will find much surprising information in this book, and much food for thought regarding the repressive political systems studied. Frank Stern, in his article “Antagonistic Memories: The Post-War Survival and Alienation of Jews and Germans,” looks at the collectively shared suffering of the Jews, and sees that for many Germans the Holocaust was a passing phenomenon, a transitory reality of which memories are all that remain (and even these are covered by stylized event narratives characterized by emotional distance). Stern comments that oral history can also be viewed as an *art of silence*. Lutz Niethammer asks “Where Were You on 17 June,” referring to the uprising in East Berlin in 1953. The official versions of this workers’ revolt were all produced by the ruling party of East Germany, so that the actual participants had no hand in shaping the image. Thus, as was often the case in postwar Germany (both East and West), an official “legend” was created. Through his interviews Niethammer is able to clarify dimensions of the happening that are at odds with the principal political interpretations. Dorothee Wierling’s “A German Generation of Reconstruction: The Children of the Weimar Republic in the GDR” focuses on the life histories of two informants, and sees that it was not only the growing political and social crises of Weimar but also its growing *embourgeoisement* that prepared them for the reconstruction of East Germany in the postwar years.

Three authors, Daria Khubova, Andrei Ivakkiev, and Tonia Sharova, chart the background of oral history studies in the former Soviet Union. In the past, the recording of anecdotes was often reason for arrest, but after *glasnost* oral history clubs and societies developed rapidly. One in particular, Memorial, was set up to document the experiences of victims of Stalinism. Today there are over 5,000 members in Moscow, another 5,000 in St. Petersburg, and over 15,000 in Lvov. Several cases illustrate the particular difficulties that oral historians encounter in the former USSR. A number of Soviet volunteers in the Spanish Civil War were killed by other "volunteers" who were actually agents sent by the Soviet secret service to eliminate Russians hostile to the Stalin regime. Soviet doctors serving in the International Red Cross were likewise covert members of the military system who carried out subversive tasks for the regime. Irina Sherbakova, who records over 250 interviews with ex-prisoners of the infamous Soviet prison in "The Gulag in Memory," was amazed at their willingness to talk, given that talk of the prisons camps could be deadly dangerous. Atidrás Kovács's "The Abduction of Imre Nagy and Group" demonstrates the difficulty of reconstructing a highly significant historical event through oral history; Kovács concludes that what he has done is not historically reliable. Even so, such reconstructions allow us to understand the meaning of a historical event at a much more profound level.

Martha Ackelsberg, in "Mujeres Libres: The Preservation of Memory and the Politics of Repression in Spain," points out that in spite of commonalities between the militant anarchist women of 1936, the *veteranas* of the Mujeres Libres, and contemporary post-Franco feminists (*jóvenes*), there exists an apparently unbridgeable disjuncture between the groups. One reason given is the virtual abolition of political memory during the Franco period. Selma Leydesdorff's "A Shattered Silence: The Life Stories of Survivors of the Jewish Proletariat of Amsterdam," an excellent study of the Jews of Amsterdam who returned in postwar years, asks a question that identifies one of the central themes of the book:

How do we relate our results to the field of research dealing with the ways in which different non-Jewish individuals and groups came to terms with that period, and have created forms of collective memory which might conflict with or even exclude the memories of others who witnessed the very same events?

The last article, Renate Siebert's "Don't Forget: Fragments of a Negative Tradition," is in her own words a meditation. Siebert is one of those Germans born during the war who has had to deal with the anguish-generated silence that followed the collapse of the mighty Third Reich. She finally left Germany, settled in Italy, and proceeded to work out her own sense of guilt for the past of her people. In 1989 a BBC program, "The Fascist Legacy," addressed the fact that Italian Fascists were never tried for their war crimes in the way that the Germans and Japanese were. Reaction to the BBC broadcast in Italy — where memory of this period is suppressed — causes Siebert to talk of an "expulsion syndrome," an attempt to shift attention to the external.

It should be apparent by now that I think this book is an extremely valuable resource, not only for the factual information presented but also for its provocative statements concerning both the difficulty of conducting oral history research on repressive periods and the potential meaning of the sometimes historically inaccurate memories that emerge.

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