



BOOK REVIEWS

The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe. By James Mark. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. xxviii + 312 pp.

James Mark's interest focuses on the criminalization of the communist past and its representation from the position of victims, phenomena manifested in the interaction of public-institutional and individual memory practices.¹ The seven chapters of the book are divided into two parts: the first reconstructs post-1989 memory culture and the second is concerned with personal histories. A total of the 118 interviews were carried out, two thirds in Hungary and one third in Poland and the former Czechoslovakia. Although the chapters are written as case studies from several different previous research subjects, and some have already been published, the commonality of questions definitely gives the book the form of a monograph.

Memory politics have gradually risen to prominence in the region since the mid-1990s, and their purpose, according to Mark, is not to confirm or express power over the past, but to show that it lives on in the present and to confront it. Action is directed at putting a final closure on the past. What has emerged is a “powerful new discourse which asserted that difficult pasts were collective experiences that needed to be addressed and overcome in order for a society to be truly democratic” (p.xv). The result is a right-wing political current focusing on historical memory, whose rhetoric recreates the pre-1989 anti-Communist struggle. It claims that the presence of (former) Communists in political and economic life is evidence that the system has not been overthrown. It secondly reshapes the memory of resistance prior to the political transition so as to present itself as the sole true heir of the former anti-Communist opposition. This is accompanied by the exclusion from the pre-1989 opposition to Communism (or anti-Stalinism in the case of the successor parties) of left-wing groups, which it identifies with the enemy, the former repressors of opposition and their

1 A more detailed review in Hungarian is Máté Zombory, “A bűnös és az áldozat, avagy a posztkommunizmus totalitárius nyelve” [The Perpetrator and the Victim, or the Totalitarian Language of Post-Communism], James Mark: *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, *Budapesti Könyvszemle* 24, no. 2. (2012): 112–18.

collaborators. The political program is clear: the revolution must be completed, which means finally excluding Communists from public life.

Mark examines the value-set of the new memory culture through the Romanian presidential history commission and the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, which latter caused an international stir. He sees these institutions, which present the “transition” from the series of crimes constituting Communism to liberal democracy and the securing of human rights, as having the primary ideological role of declaring the break with the party-state system and strengthening identification with the new system. “Here finishing the revolution meant the establishment of official bodies that could assist the dismantling of Communist mentalities through the state-sponsored propagation of new, liberal interpretations of the past.” (p.31).

One chapter discusses museum sites concerned with the Communist past: the former political prison in Sighetu Marmășiei in Romania, the House of Terror in Budapest, the Statue Park in Hungary, Grūtas Park in Lithuania, and the few national museum exhibitions (in Bucharest, Riga and Budapest) devoted to the representation of the Communist past. This chapter seems to have been structured according to museum typology, whereas the next chapter, also concerned with museums, is structured by geography. Here, Mark analyses institutions in the Baltic states, one in a former Soviet political prison, and the other two “occupation museums” which did not fit neatly into the typology of the previous chapter. Mark claims that the exhibitions, whose program proclaim the completion of the revolution, compensate the victims of Communism by criminalizing the past: if the “perpetrators” have not been judicially brought to account or excluded from public life, then they should at least be judged in the cultural sphere. Siting exhibitions presenting “Communism” in former places of political terror makes the political condemnation of Communism and both the individual and national construction of the “victim of Communism” more plausible.² The author focuses his analyses on the “forgotten history” of the sites, in attempting to archaeologically uncover the truth about Communism, the institutions fail to find absolutely conclusive evidence. Mark does not consider how or to what extent the scene of victimization and the memory-site function guarantees historical credibility in museum representation.³

2 See Péter Apor, “Eurocommunism: Commemorating Communism in Contemporary Eastern Europe,” in *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance*, ed. Bo Strath and Gosia Pakier (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008).

3 On this see e.g. the January 2012 edition, no. 29 of *Theory, Culture & Society*.

The strength of the chapter on Baltic-state institutions is the inclusion of international memory and the geopolitical environment in an analysis of local representation strategies. It examines how the institutions of the new anti-Communist discourse face up to the double international expectation by addressing the Fascist past. In the European integration process, Western organizations set proper commemoration of the Holocaust as an absolute condition of “becoming European”, and in this respect indicated that anti-Communists who supported the Fascists could not be lauded as heroes. Considerable international pressure has also come from Putin-era Russia, where commemoration of the Red Army’s heroic role in liberating Europe from Fascism is increasingly becoming a point of national-imperial pride. In the former Soviet republics, where (except Lithuania) a large Russian-speaking population which settled during the Communist era live, this looks like evidence of a present threat of Russian imperialist aspirations. Mark comes to the conclusion that the Holocaust is included in the Baltic memory culture in a way that does not challenge but rather supports the idea of the nation’s victimization during the era of Communist dictatorship.

The new, reconstructed memory culture, partly via the institutions analyzed in the book, encourages individuals to rewrite their personal past in the categories of “victim” and “resister” on one side and “perpetrator” and “collaborator” on the other. Mark’s interview subjects are from the generation born between 1918 and 1940, whose lives have been shaped by confrontation with the Communist, politicized autobiography, the requirement to weave the right ideological elements into their life story. At major stages of their lives, they have been required, in a public and proper way, to present their past as evidence of their loyalty. Since 1989, this generation has again been confronted with politicized autobiographical norms, and so autobiographical narratives have been rewritten according to the values and norms of the new, post-Communist memory culture.

The author does not stop here, but puts the question of how, as a subject of the hegemonic and homogenizing memory discourse, the individual is capable of rejecting stigmatizing identifications and developing an alternative position. The three chapters based on the interviews discuss conflict situations in which the autobiographical narrative cannot be delivered in the previous way. Only some of the interview respondents, however, react to the dictates of the new discourse.

The life accounts of former party members, for example, could clearly have been analyzed in terms of how they react to being identified as “perpetrators/

accomplices in Communist crimes” as has become prevalent since 1989, and their strategies for demonstrating their democratic commitment. Instead, the analysis focuses on anti-Fascism, which party members up to 1956 had to make part of their public autobiographies as proof of loyalty. The author might have acquired a sharper picture of how criminalizing the Communist past has forced the rewriting of autobiographies if he had focused his analysis of how the subjects coped with their past, not specifically on the anti-Fascist element, which was subsequently compromised by the Communist regimes, but on bonding to the party state and previous ideological commitment (including anti-Fascism).

Mark presents what is at stake in adopting the “victim of Communism” position through analysis of interviews where the former system caused personal suffering for the respondents. One of his important claims is that heroic opposition is absent from the narrative elements of the “anti-Communist autobiography”: refusal of the system meant retreating into the private sphere and refusing all kinds of commitment. In this schema, what provides the political character of the autobiographical narrative is the pairing of retreat into the private sphere with a sense of historic mission through the preservation, in family history, of national values. Becoming a victim appears as the consequence of refusing to cooperate. Mark points out that despite the assertion of being non-political, this autobiographical narrative is formed by the kind of political self-presentation which was prescribed in the Communist system, raising the story of the family past into the century-old history of anti-Communist struggle. At the same time, autobiographical narratives that avoid self-presentation as victim are motivated by the rejection and uncovering of the prevailing anti-Communist discourse. Being a former victim of Communism may bring benefits, but the story of being a victim of Communism for subjects of the “anti-anti-Communist autobiography” is not a matter of relating true experiences so much as adopting a retrospective identity whose black-and-white features cover up complex and varying relationships with the Communist system. For the maneuver of refusing the victim position, there are no ready models, as is revealed by the interview subjects’ constant attention to the possible implications of their narrative and word use. They are concerned not with the justice of the past but with the injustice of the currently-prevailing perspective and the lack of a position permitting true speech. The struggle is no longer between rival experiences of the past.

The boundaries to speaking out are also addressed in the analysis of interviews with Hungarian victims and witnesses of rape by the Red Army. Mark’s

conclusion is that the subjects could only speak up in terms of the prevailing anti-Communist discourse, presenting themselves as part of a nation that became a victim of Communism, and their story as an example of national victimization. Thus the repression suffered during several decades of taboo is put in parallel with the themes of repression of the nation by a foreign power, and the coming out in public about the trauma after 1989 is put in parallel with the liberation of the nation. The opportunities to speak out were of course basically for women, because according to the prevailing discourse, Hungarian women embodying the nation were raped by barbarian men, and thus the position of Hungarian men was also undermined. In this case, too, the author examines the options for opposing the demands of the prevailing narrative. Since the generation involved has no non-political narrative scheme at its disposal for verbalizing the atrocities of the Red Army, the only way of refusing the constraints of the prevailing discourse is to deny or marginalize the rape in the past.

Unfortunately, the interview analyses go no further than illustrating each statement with quotations. There are relatively few extracts from the interviews: in the final chapter, for example, based on 31 interviews, the author quotes one brief detail from each of 15 interviews, and only makes sporadic mentions of the structural specifics of the narrative. This would have been useful for determining the biographical significance of each theme and past event. Mark frequently links this significance to the interview subjects' political or ideological affinities or their origins, which could be problematic in some cases. In extreme cases, it could lead to tautologies of the kind that somebody exercises the options of an anti-Communist discourse which is defined as right wing because he or she comes from an anti-Communist, right-wing/Catholic environment.

Mark's premise is therefore that political dissatisfaction in post-Communism is concentrated on the lack of a revolutionary break between systems, the presence of former Communists in public life being identified as evidence of the survival of Communism. The only substantial criticism is the one-sidedness of the chosen conceptual framework, which defines the idea of completing the revolution as purely a right-wing discourse. The discussion might have accommodated, for example, the modernizing current citing Western examples, most of all the "German model", which blames the surviving Communist mentality for the democratic deficit. In other words: is there another program for completion of the revolution? The "left-wing program" might have been considered, offsetting the impression that the struggle against the persistence of the Communist past is a right-wing privilege. A better procedure would be to

first identify the discourses which set as their objective the termination of the persistence of the Communist past and only then examine whether they have become resources for one political side or the other.

Since the book did not set out to historically examine how post-Communist discourses have shaped relations with the past, it should not be taken to task for not doing so. Nonetheless, how the political current known as “new anti-Communism” rose to prevalence in the region, how completion of the revolution has become a right-wing program, and what political forces were competing in the post-1989 period are important questions. Although Mark does take into account the contest between the continental memory traditions of East and West, he does not deal with their interactions or with the complex effect by which the Holocaust memory has become the model for the representation of Communism. I think this may give us an answer to why historical catastrophes, cultural trauma,⁴ victim rivalry⁵ and personal witness⁶ have become the primary factors of European memory politics,⁷ or in other words, why the “post-Communist totalitarian language of ‘victim’, ‘collaborator’ and ‘resister’” (p.xxviii) have risen to prevalence.

Translated by Alan Campbell

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4 Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

5 Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes: Génocide, identité, reconnaissance* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

6 Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

7 See Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Jeffrey C. Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 5–85.