

The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present: Methodology and Ethics in Russian, Baltic and Central European Oral History and Memory Studies, eds. Melanie Ilic, Dalia Leinarte, New York, London: Routledge, 2016. 270 p. ISBN 978-1138-933-45-3

It is probably quite common for historians to feel the need to use one source or another as soon as they can: historically significant papers or items unexpectedly discovered in an old cellar, important documented testimonies secretly smuggled out of an otherwise closed-off country, or archive material finally made available after the removal of the 'TOP SECRET' label. However, historians rarely feel such pressure to use one source as has been the case for a couple of decades now in the post-Soviet space among historians specialising in the Soviet past. This source, the memories of witnesses of the Soviet period, started to be studied scientifically using the oral history method around ten years after the end of the period itself. Another ten years had to pass before the source started being critically assessed, by asking what, and in what way, we actually discover from this source.

The collection *The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present*, published in 2016, about the discussion of problems in the application of oral history methodology and its ethics in Russia, the Baltic and East Central European countries, can be considered one of the first attempts, and a very important attempt, at trying to answer these questions. It should come as no surprise that in this geographical and political space, only now are we trying to find answers to questions that were asked, argued and considered in the West in the 1980s and 1990s. Dalia Leinartė, one of the collection's editors, states that in the first decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, historians did not trust the overly subjective interview method, and relied on archive documents that could offer 'objective facts' (p. 12). However, we can look at the history of oral history in the post-Soviet space from another point of view. Memory contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and, having started to assess the recently ended epoch, it proved to be so dominant that it practically dictated the main direction in historiography. Historians merely had to pursue its mission, to use 'objective facts' to back the history of the deportations, repressions and killings already recounted from memory. In other words, the pressure of memory was too great to allow researchers to engage with it as an object

of historical research. And only in the 21st century did historians start to overcome the pressure of memory, or more accurately, they learnt how to overcome it, and started to speak about how memories of the Soviet past are significantly more varied, how its relationship with history's 'objective facts' is more complicated, and how the role of the historian is not as straightforward as was initially believed.

The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present consists of writings by well-known researchers who have a large amount of experience in the application of the oral history method, so the book can be read as a collective self-reflection, helping us to understand the field of post-Soviet memory research which is forming researchers' views, assessments and understanding, what oral history means to them, what they expect of it, and what it lets them discover. The fact that self-reflection is one of the book's main (and most valuable) leitmotifs is demonstrated from the very beginning, where a conversation between Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya, which took place in 1995, is published for the first time. They discussed one of the first large-scale oral history projects in the post-Soviet space, which they initiated and implemented, and which was later published as 'A Revolution of their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History' (1998). It is symbolic that this conversation has only now been made public, even though it reveals problems and insights associated with the oral history method that are later encountered in the writings of almost every author in the book.

The illusion of an 'ideal source'

The Lithuanian historian Aurimas Švedas rather ironically called material acquired using the oral history method the possibility to construct 'ideal sources' (p. 162). Yet irony is but a step away from a serious problem, because what at first may appear as an 'ideal source' can eventually turn into the 'worst possible source'. In fact, oral history does give us the opportunity to select who we want to interview, to ask them the questions that are of most interest to us (rather than be satisfied with what has survived *a priori*), to find out about things one would not discover anywhere else, to take a deeper interest, to specify things along the way, and to correct our collocutors (sources!) and ourselves. When reading the book, on many occasions we sense that there must have been many completely un-ironic preconceived hopes among researchers, or the not-quite-conscious hope of meeting their 'ideal source'. However, this hope would be crushed once they encountered the application of the oral history method in practice. Thus, the book shows just how that illusion crumbled before historians' eyes.

This demise might also be understood as a failed interview, which is how some authors treat it. However, of much greater value are the texts that either directly or indirectly raise the question of what constitutes

a 'successful interview'? Dalia Leinartė discusses one of the potential 'failures' of interviews, the speaker's silence, forgetfulness, fragmented and incoherent speech, and specifically in her case, speakers' inability to recount the everyday life of the late Soviet period. However, instead of simply declaring such cases as 'failed' or unsuccessful interviews, the researcher seeks to explain the reasons for the conversations being filled with pauses: she presents the interesting interpretation that it was not so difficult for her subjects to speak about traumatic experiences, but more about what does not have its own narrative in the public discourse, and therefore the speakers do not know how to speak about it (pp. 13–15).

An exemplary case of a reconsidered 'failure' could be the analysis of Laura J. Olson's interview with her subject (given the name of Evdokiya Timofeevna) from provincial Russia. Having acknowledged that many misunderstandings occurred during the conversation, she states that 'gaps in understanding are not a sign that something has gone awry; in fact, they are a sign that a dialogue between those two points of view is taking place' (p. 62). Having understood her 'outsider' position (a foreigner in a Russian village), deconstructing her own preconceived way of thinking, and having assessed the account she heard in the context of traditional narratives, Olson reached probably one of the most important conclusions of this collection, that 'although the researcher may be seeking information, in fact a person who speaks about her own biography uses these stories to make sense of her own experience, to choose her identity, to perform her own values and to relate to others' (p. 66). In other words, the interview should be understood as an effort to construct and maintain one's own identity. It is a personal account, presenting the speaker themselves, and as such it could hardly be assessed through an informative/non-informative, truth/untruth, right/wrong or coherent/incoherent prism.

Thus, the consideration of such successful 'failed' interviews shows why the desire for an 'ideal source' is only an illusion. First of all, the interview is the most unpredictable of sources, as no one can ever be sure what they will hear during the conversation, and any researcher embracing the oral history method should be aware of this. Coming to interview their subject and wanting to extract some information, they might end up leaving without having heard a single new fact, and might instead be forced to think about the relationship of private, personal memory with the public discourse and the culture of memory. Secondly, the question of what a successful interview is appears pointless, as any interview, even one filled with pauses, cracks and diversions, is material for research; only, as mentioned earlier, not necessarily for the research that the researcher initially had in mind. Thus, all interviews are equally (un)successful. Thirdly, the interview is truly a constructed source, but this construction does not lead to an 'ideal', but at least 'the very worst' source, as the interviewer who formulated the questions and controls (or tries to control) the conversation

unavoidably goes further away from the historic reality that they think they want to reach, whereas the subject, instead of fulfilling the needs of the listener, pursues their own interests. In addition, both are affected by the culture of established memory, public and private discourse narratives, and numerous other external factors. Thus, the interview is a construct arising from the interaction of two people, a kind of mutual compromise of their interests, one that is worthy of scientific analysis; but each time we must ask what the speaker is saying, and what they are talking about.

Interviews as power relations

The pieces in the collection are reflective in various ways, and yet on the other side of these (self-)reflections we can grasp certain theoretical limits to the reflection. They are best exposed when going from methodological questions to deliberations on questions of ethics. In the introductory piece by Melanie Ilic, she gives 'good practice' guidelines for applying the oral history method: ensuring the speaker's confidentiality, minimising the potential for harm, showing respect for the speaker, informing them how the interview material will be used, demonstrating care, etc (p. 3). Some of these guidelines can be corrected, and the collection's authors sometimes do that; however, it would be hard to find a professional researcher who would question them in principle, or who would fail to abide by them in practice.

Nevertheless, the theoretical provisions for these guidelines should also be understood and given consideration, but there is practically no evidence of this in the book. Of the guidelines mentioned here, and from most of the pieces in the collection, it is evident that conducting an interview is understood as a form of power relations, with clear, predetermined positions: the interviewer takes the stronger position, while the subject is the weaker party, and precisely because of this, the imperative not to damage any ethical principles is directed solely at the interviewer. The origins of this provision probably lie in the fact that oral history appeared as a new way of fulfilling the need for social and everyday historiography from the second half of the 20th century, to tell the story 'from below', giving increasingly more attention to hitherto marginalised groups, understood in a very broad sense, such as women, and, in a much narrower sense, such as psychiatric patients (here the anthropological nature of oral history is revealed, the get to know the unknown, the Other). It is no accident that oral history is characterised by titles such as 'Silenced Voices', 'The Untold Story', 'Forgotten People', and so on, implying that the purpose of oral history is to help recreate justice, to give a voice to those who did not have one earlier; so it appears that oral history is applied only to disadvantaged, repressed, downtrodden and marginalised social groups.

In this sense, it is logical that another significant leitmotif of this collection is the feminist paradigm: it is represented by the collection's

editors, as well as by the book's ideological authorities, Anastasia Posadskaya and Barbara Alpern Engel, and numerous other (though not all) authors. The leadership of the feminist paradigm in post-Soviet oral history also appears to be logical because during the Soviet period, unlike in the West, feminism could not perform its undeniably important role, while the status of women, their image and situation, at the time was so distorted that it would be hard to doubt that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, their actual situation and experiences would need to be understood anew. The feminist approach that prevails in the book might not serve best in terms of its methodological comments (even though there are some valuable ones indeed, for example, why Polish women can speak more openly about sexual violence experienced in the postwar years than Ukrainian women, see Karolina Koziura, Olena Lytovka, pp. 217–231), as for its interesting and original interpretations (even in the existing rich historiographical context on this topic) of the condition of women in Soviet society (for example, Yulia Gradszkova's insights about the over-simplified image of the Soviet woman as a victim of the 'double burden', pp. 38–50).

Thus, the contribution of oral history to historiography, when examining the experiences of both women and other marginalised social groups, is enormous, and could hardly be overrated. As Leena Kurvet-Käosaar's study about love in women's life stories during the Soviet years (pp. 110–128) demonstrates, there is still a lot of potential for innovative research. Nevertheless, almost three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, we can express cautious surprise that oral history researchers studying gender problems still pay so much attention to women, and speak so rarely about men. This is despite the fact that our existing data (suicide figures, alcoholism and violent behaviour, etc), both from the Soviet period and the post-Soviet period, shows that it was actually men who had to go through (and might probably still be going through) a socio-cultural crisis. Of course, men were not a marginalised group in the Soviet years, and it is not worth expanding on the 'Soviet man' issue here; but this example does lead to the question whether oral history, as it is applied to Soviet-era research, is not too focused on (ex)marginalised groups, and practically ignores opportunities where it can be applied in a broader sense, thereby not contributing to solving important problems in historiography.

But, most likely, it would be more important to ask whether in all cases the interview, in the sense of two powers, should be understood as the interaction of two unequal participants (the weaker and the stronger). Is it always the interviewer who holds the power as the asker and interpreter, thereby being the one who can adopt the narrative as their own? (As Ingrida Gečienė states: 'This reflects the inevitable unequal power relationship arising during the interpretative phase, because authority and ownership of the text ultimately belong to the author', p. 87.) Some of the pieces present heroes of oral history who saw themselves as equals, and

even 'stronger' parties, also being recognised as such by their interviewers (like the mentioned Evdokiya, who was described as a 'patient elder teacher', p. 62). While in cases like those '(un)successful' histories given by Aurimas Švedas, when the subject, dissatisfied with the results of the interview, practically forces the interview to be done again (pp. 165–168), we can wonder whether the subject has not already taken up the position of the clearly stronger party (or at least see themselves as having done so), and therefore, consciously or not, seeks to manipulate or construct the 'ideal source', but only according to their preconceived ideal. This is not just a theoretical question, as oral history can be applied when analysing, for example, the history of the former Soviet political and cultural elite, who are often capable of creating excellent apologetic narratives, thereby influencing historical research. Therefore, the methodological consideration of such material should be no less important than being careful not to impinge on the rights of the 'weaker' interview subjects.

The collection *The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present* can be read as an attempt by Soviet oral history researchers to understand an unpredictable source, to make it more predictable, to give it meaning after the illusion of the 'ideal source' has already crumbled, and to search for alternative ways it can be used. The book's authors have shown just how far they have already gone down this path, and that oral history is valuable, even if it happens to be the 'very worst possible source'. They seem, quite unintentionally, to add one more precaution: only by doubting oral history can we protect it from new illusions.

Tomas Vaiseta
Vilnius University