

A multifaceted picture of the memory processes in Eastern Europe. In search of reconciliation

**CBEEES
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Constructions
and Instru-
mentalization
of the Past. A
Comparative
Study on
Memory
Management
in the Region**

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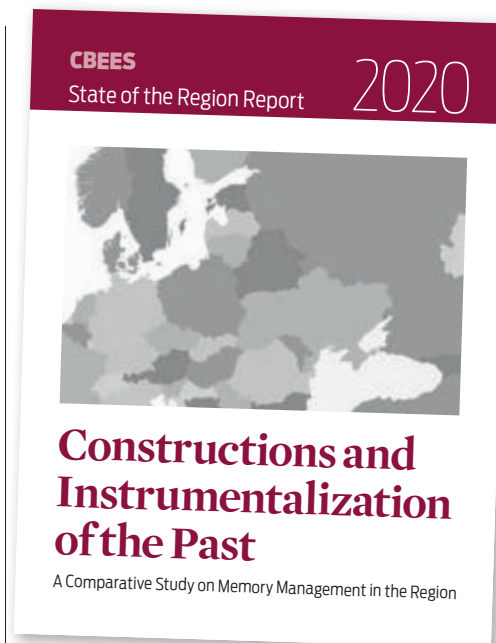
How can one write a book about the management of collective memory in today's Eastern Europe without becoming essentialist, applying overly broad strokes, or repeating phrases, half-truths, or long-known facts? Södertörn University manages to avoid these dangers in a collection of articles entitled *Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past. A Comparative Study on Memory Management in the Region*, published early 2021. The striving for unconditionality is so strong on the part of the editors that neither in the title nor the subtitle of the book do they even specify the region that is its focus. To discern this, one must turn to the series designation, CBEEES, which is an abbreviation for the Centre for Baltic and Eastern European Studies, an internationally renowned and prominent center for research on Eastern Europe at Södertörn University.

The articles in the volume deal not only with the countries of what was once called the Eastern Bloc, but also with Germany, with its double past of the Third Reich and the GDR, and Turkey, with its different history but similar memory management. Russia does not receive its own chapter, but like the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, there are frequent references to it in the book. Nevertheless, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa accurately sums up the situations of the Eastern European countries as postcolonial, post-catastrophic and post-socialist. And post-Holocaust.

The book comprises articles by professional historians, cultural scientists and activists. The inclusion of so many countries and the posing of so many questions that are fundamental to both our contemporary history and our future make the entire undertaking seem at once commendable, insurmountable in scope, and risky. In each chapter of the book, all of which have a considerable length and an impressive battery of footnotes, memory management is examined in country after country, most often the 20th century. Some chapters also compare and summarize the results. Especially in this context a chapter on Russia would have been helpful.

COMMON TO THE COUNTRIES discussed in the book is the state control of collective memory management by such means as laws and schooling and through museums, memorials and street names.

In the Eastern European countries, the UN's adoption of the Genocide Convention of 1948 has been a starting point for a series of memory laws that not only criminalized the denial of the Holocaust but also the abominations to which, for example, Armenians, Ukrainians, Poles, Azeris and Lithuanians were subjected by various actors at various points throughout history. In Ukraine, it is a crime to disrespect the memory of the Nazi-aligned Ukrainian Insurgent Army, while glorifying it is a crime in Poland. In France, it is a crime to deny the Armenian genocide, while in Turkey it is a crime to acknowledge that it occurred. This is how Per Anders Rudling sums up the situation. Genocide has an ancient history. As regards Eastern Europe,



its past brings to mind the French philosopher Jules Michelet, who as early as 1851 wrote about Russia's intention to not only destroy Poland as a country, but to also eradicate its language and population.

IN THE BOOK'S INTRODUCTION, two extreme concepts are set directly or indirectly against each other: denial and "meaculpaim". Many representatives of the various state memorial organizations attempt to diminish or deny their own nation's participation in the Holocaust of Europe's Jewish population, in mass murder, or in massacres of their own population or of that of neighboring countries. The opposite approach, which often characterizes the Western European memory management of history, is to generously, generally and probably most often quite rightly acknowledge the own nation's collective guilt for historical injustices. Despite the book's intention, the reader and from time to time the authors may be tempted to simplify and idealize the collective memory management in the rest of Europe, which is rarely addressed in this publication, even for comparative purposes.

The lack of a chapter on memory management in Russia may seem strange at first, but it leaves more room for the study of memory cultures of other countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania, which are sometimes overlooked

Continued. A multifaceted picture of the memory processes in Eastern Europe



In 1930 in Moscow, USSR, the Soviet government puts a group of top rank economists and engineers on trial, accusing them of plotting a coup d'état. The charges are fabricated and the punishment, if convicted, is death. Image from *The Trial* by Sergei Loznitsa, published in *CBEES Annual Report 2020: Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past*.

in this context. The ethnic group that gets the least space in the Södertörn volume is the Roma and the memory management of their history, despite the fact that solid knowledge exists on this subject.

In Bulgaria, it is not only necessary to deal with the Communist era but also with the treatment of the Turkish minority. In her chapter, Evelina Kelbecheva emphasizes the need for the archives to be opened and remain open. Here the author could have tied in the heated debate that raged a few years ago about Julia Kristeva's possible connection with the Bulgarian security police in Paris and whether the secret Communist-era dossier on her, which was subsequently published, was genuine or fabricated. Bulgaria seems to be the country with the strongest sense of "Socialist nostalgia", another important concept examined in the volume, while this sentiment is weakest in the Czech Republic.

In Germany, unlike the other countries covered in the book, state interference in memory management is minimal. The keyword used to describe relative independence from state intervention is *Staatsferne*. Yet despite this approach, the various actors often receive government funding. Jenny Wüstenberg demonstrates this in her chapter, and it would have been worthwhile to know even more about the mechanisms behind this indirect state control.

THE REPORT FOCUSES less frequently on the role of culture in collective memory management. One exception is Irina San-

domirskaja's chapter on the film director Sergei Loznitsa. In *The Trial* and *The State Funeral*, he recycles Soviet documentaries, makes a few additions, and includes discarded material. This procedure prevents the uncomfortable truths of the Communist system from falling into oblivion. A similar study could have been made using Andrzej Wajda and Polish post-war history as a starting point. In his use of earlier film material, Loznitsa more consistently refrains from any form of commentary.

One actor that is given special attention is the diaspora. Emigrants and returnees provide a different perspective, one which has sometimes prevailed in memory management. Examples cited here are Ukraine, the Baltic countries and Azerbaijan.

Yuliya Yurchuk examines various periods in Ukrainian collective memory management. Actors tied to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army have had streets named after them and been honored with memorials that replaced statues of Lenin and other Soviet leaders toppled in what has come to be known as *Leninopad*, (literally translated as "Lenin-fall"). After the Russian annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in eastern Ukraine, memory management becomes part of the nation's security policy. The article however quotes the current President Volodymyr Zelen'skyi's first New Year's Eve speech from December 31, 2019, when he claimed that street names were unimportant, so long as the streets were lit and in good condition. Several chapters focus on Ukraine, and it would have been interesting to know a bit more about a few major changes that have taken place in the country's memory management during the time that has now passed since Zelen'skyi was sworn in as president.

THOMAS DE WAAL tackles a particularly difficult subject: the memory cultures of the Caucasus. For Georgians, the memory of the victims of the 1989 demonstrations against the Soviet Union is an important component of the historical narrative. In Armenian memory culture, the 2020 defeat of the Armenians in the war against Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is associated with the Turkish genocide of the Armenians in 1915.

In her chapter, Florence Fröhlig refers to Sigmund Freud and the trauma that occurs when



The National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv, Ukraine.

PHOTO: ANDRIY155 / CREATIVE COMMONS

a person is not given the opportunity to bury and mourn their dead. Here Freud functions more as a model than as an actual explanation; as the author points out, it can be difficult to apply psychoanalysis to the collective memory management in this region. There is a risk of medicalizing the problems in the area, or of demonizing them. One might add that Lenin is the most spectacular example of the Freudian association. In his mausoleum on Red Square, he lies unburied in his glass coffin, haunting post-Soviet Russia like a grotesque transformation of the Marxist specter referred to in the Communist Manifesto.

Andrej Kotljarchuk analyzes the history of the white-red-white flag of the Belarusian opposition and its changing political significance over time. In 1994, Lukashenko was sworn in as president under this flag – but today it is banned. National symbols have their own cycles.

A reading of the volume provides a clarifying and multifaceted picture of the memory processes in so many countries, as well as the similarities and differences between them. The reader must finally despair and come to the conclusion that history, like the individual, is a prisoner of the collective memory of wars, disasters, genocides and massacres, and that there is no way out, no future. At least not in this region. Perhaps historians and researchers only make matters worse. Still, a few words recurrent by words inspire hope: belief in ethical values, the desire for reconciliation, pluralism, democracy, openness, access to the archives, science, human rights.

AS POINTED OUT in the book, the EU is its own, distinct actor here. Among other things, mention is made of the 2008 Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism. One of

2021's European Capitals of Culture was to have been Timisoara in Romania. That city is best-known for being the place where the 1989 uprising against President Ceaușescu first began, an uprising whose various details have been questioned. Yet it is also known for the 1990 Timisoara Declaration, an appeal against chauvinism that called for greater scrutiny of the crimes of the Communist era. Now the city will be honored in 2023 instead.

Several of the articles deal with the concept of “victimhood”, and with what this notion does for an individual or group that defines its position in relation to other individuals

and other groups in this way. The volume notes that this part of the world is characterized by an excess of traumatic memories of Nazism, Communism and nationalism, as well as by a kind of competition between different groups to lay claim to victimhood. All groups are indeed victims in different ways, but as is pointed out in the book, their victimhood is sometimes used to explain away their own guilt.

THE VOLUME PASSES the challenging intellectual strength test with which the subject confronts it and is consistently interesting and strong in its scientific approach.

The book is a thought-proving read. There are so many wasted lives, so much suffering behind all these conflicts! Whose memory management will be next in line? Perhaps that of victims of ecological disasters or past or present pandemics? The book calls for a joint reconciliation effort and urges future researchers to focus not so much on the content of various interpretations of the past as on understanding the barriers between them – and, one might add, on understanding each other. ✕

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