

ROUTLEDGE APPROACHES TO HISTORY

The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present

Methodology and Ethics in Russian, Baltic and Central European Oral History and Memory Studies

Edited by
Melanie Ilic and Dalia Leinarte



The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present

This collection examines practical and ethical issues inherent in the application of oral history and memory studies to research about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Case studies highlight the importance of ethical good practice, including the reflexive interrogation of the interviewer and researcher and aspects of gender and national identity.

Researchers use oral history to analyze present-day recollections of the Soviet past, thereby extending our understanding beyond archival records, official rhetoric and popular mythology. Oral history explores individual life stories, but this has sometimes resulted in rather incomplete, incoherent, inconsistent or illogical narratives. Oral history, therefore, presents the researcher with a number of methodological and ethical dilemmas, including the interpretation of 'silence' in biographical accounts.

This book links the discussion of oral history ethics with that of memory studies. Memories are shaped by factors that may be, simultaneously, both consecutive and disrupted. In written accounts and responses to interview questions, respondents sometimes display nostalgia for the Soviet past or, conversely, may seek to de-mythologise the realities of Soviet rule. Case studies explore what to do when interview subjects and memoirists consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously "forget" aspects of their own past or themselves seek to take control of the research process.

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Glossary

Ateitininkai	[early twentieth-century Lithuanian] Catholic youth movement
<i>babka</i>	old woman
<i>blat</i>	the ‘economy of favours’; informal agreements; exchange of services; payment of bribes
<i>boikaya</i>	feisty
<i>chastushka/chastushki</i>	humorous folk verse/s
<i>defitsit</i>	deficit; shortages
<i>dzīvesstāsts</i>	[Latvian] life stories
Eesti Naisliit	Estonian Women’s League
EKLA	Eesti Kultuurilooline Arhiiv; Estonian Cultural History Archives
EU	European Union
<i>gegužinės</i>	[Lithuanian] outdoor parties; picnics
<i>glasnost’</i>	[Gorbachev’s policy of] openness [in the late 1980s]
GYES	<i>Gyermekgondozási segély</i> ; [Hungarian] three-year paid child-care subsidy
KGB	<i>Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti</i> ; Committee of State Security
Klaipėda Days	public holidays [in Lithuania]
<i>kolkhoz</i>	collective farm
Komsomol	League of Young Communists
kulak	wealthy peasant
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NKVD	<i>Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del</i> ; People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs
NMV	[Latvian] <i>Nacionālās mutvārdu vēstures projekts</i> ; National Oral History Project
<i>perestroika</i>	[Gorbachev’s policy of] restructuring [in the late 1980s]
Pioneers	Communist Party organisation for children
<i>porcha</i>	spoiling, damage
<i>prazdniki</i>	public holidays

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<i>putevki</i>	travel vouchers
<i>rabfak</i>	rabochii fakul'tet; workers' faculty
<i>raspīsalis'</i>	(formal) registration (of a marriage)
<i>rod</i>	family, kin
Sajūdis	[1980s and 1990s] Lithuanian national revival movement
Šaulių sąjunga	<i>Lietuvos Šaulių Sąjunga</i> ; Union of Lithuanian Riflemen
<i>sglaz</i>	evil eye
<i>šķīra</i>	class [Latvian]
<i>skromnost'</i>	modesty
<i>spekulant</i>	speculator; profiteer
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
sīrbai	<i>īstrebītel'nye batal'ony</i> ; Soviet-backed anti-partisan units
<i>svad'ba</i>	wedding
<i>tauta</i>	[Latvian] people; nation
<i>tolchok</i>	trading on the underground market
<i>trīmda/trīmdnieki</i>	[Latvian] exile/exiles; refugee/refugees; diaspora
<i>trūdodni</i>	payment on collective farms according to days worked
UPA	Ukrayins'ka Povstans'ka Armiya; Ukrainian Insurgent Army
<i>valen'ki</i>	felt boots
<i>viensēta</i>	[Latvian] farmstead
<i>zhīvotnik</i>	living arrangements

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‘Generationsväxling och egendomsöverföring i jordbruket, 1870–2000’ (Generational Change and Property Transfer in Agriculture, 1870–2000) (2010) and by Östersjöstiftelse (the Baltic Sea Foundation) for the project ‘The Strong State and the Family: Liberation or Repression?’ (2012). She thanks her colleagues in these two projects and the editors of the current book for their generous comments on earlier versions of her chapter.

Introductions

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From Interview to Life Story

Methodology and Ethics in Oral History

Melanie Ilic

The case study chapters included in this volume are presented by authors who, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, have been closely engaged in the practice of oral history and memory studies through their academic research in the specific post-Soviet and post-socialist contexts in the Russian Federation, the Baltic States and several countries in the former East European bloc (notably here the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, as well as the former Soviet republic of Ukraine, though our findings could be applied more widely). In collating these case studies, we have been particularly interested in the methodologies employed by the researchers, that is the ways in which they conducted their research and the reasons why they chose these particular methods; it is interesting also to examine why the contributors sometimes chose to reject particular approaches in the conduct of their research. In addition, we have also been interested in focusing in part on the elaboration of the ethical issues that arose during the research process and how the contributing authors dealt with these. How did these researchers ensure that they acted in the best and most appropriate manner towards their interview respondents and in the use of other related sources of primary data?

There is not space in this brief introduction to outline all of the critical issues raised in the contributing chapters. After outlining the basic ethical principles and good practice in the conduct of oral history, this introduction focuses on discussion of the following four key critical concerns: insider/outsider debates, consent, anonymity and disclosure.

In conducting their research, our contributors have often found it necessary to move beyond, and sometimes even to question, the basic principles of good practice in terms of the standard ethical guidelines set down for academics:¹

- to ensure the confidentiality, but not necessarily the anonymity, of the respondents (the interview data should remain confidential until agreement is reached about how it may be used);
- to minimise the potential for harm by, for example, not releasing sensitive or potentially damaging information ('do no harm'/'non-maleficence');

- to show respect, recognition and tolerance towards the respondents, for example in relation to the granting of informed consent for the interview (establishing a relationship of trust that allows the respondents to express themselves freely and openly without being judged by the interviewer);
- to inform the participants prior to the interview taking place about how the resulting data may be used and shared with others;
- to demonstrate care for others ('the duty of care');
- to expand the scope of equality, fairness and justice, especially in research projects financed via public funding bodies (through project outcomes that can lead to social change/'beneficence');
- to enlarge the spheres of freedom, autonomy and choice (via project participation that may bring about individual or social benefits/'beneficence').

'Good practice' in feminist research, as many of our contributors are aware, also places a particular emphasis on an appreciation of the power dynamics evident in the conduct of oral history interviews and related practices. Sharing both 'experience' and the outcomes of the research project with the participants in the oral history interview process is, therefore, also acknowledged here as a vital part of feminist ethics. It should not be the researcher alone who benefits from the findings of the research; project outcomes should be shared as widely as possible and not least with the project participants themselves.

Such practice may help to develop the self-awareness of the interview participants and for the respondents to come to view their own experience in a different light. Such practice can also sometimes lead to the emergence of strong feelings and of close emotional bonds between the researchers and the researched, as the example of Karolina Koziura and Olena Lytovka's study of forced displacement demonstrates. As an outcome of her own experience of conducting oral history, Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck labels the interview process as 'emotional work' that can often involve painful remembering. We acknowledge here that recalling and retelling the past is often accompanied by an emotional response and, moreover, that feminist research is far from being a dispassionate process.

In some of our case studies of the use of oral history in post-socialist Eastern Europe, self-revelation by the interviewer and a candid approach to the research topic are accepted as a valid part of the identified feminist interview methodology. This can be strengthened also by approaching the interview itself as a two-way process, as a shared dialogue between the person conducting the interview and the respondent in which each learns from the other. Such an approach aims to elicit responses from the project participants on topics which they may not previously ever have discussed or would not usually talk about openly. This may include examples of past illegal acts (for example see Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderback's account

of Soviet women having abortions during periods when it was criminalised), illicit activity (such as Kelly Hignett's 'personal testimony' revelations of engagement in underground market activity as a means of 'playing the system') or other forms of transgressive behaviours. As Laura Olson points out, sometimes a willingness to talk openly about past misdemeanours and behaviours can also be interpreted as a way of re-enforcing a shared sense of community morality that may not always be reflected in official norms.

On the other hand, a definite reluctance to speak about events in the past is evident in some of our case studies even though by the time this research was being conducted and these interviews were carried out the behaviours being explored were no longer regarded in the same way as they were in Soviet times. Similarly, then, the 'silences' evident in interview transcripts, the topics about which the interviewee does not or is unwilling to speak, often provide additional evidence to the oral historian.²

In the same vein, it is important for researchers not to enter the interview process with preconceptions about their respondents that may lead unwittingly to the prejudicial shaping of the final outcomes. Likewise, as some of our case studies demonstrate, respondents may behave in such a way as to resist the direction of questioning, to steer the interview in a completely different direction, to offer a third-party report on an issue about which they themselves are being questioned or simply to change the subject altogether. This evasion strategy was an issue of some importance to a number of our case studies in conducting research on the Soviet period about which there remains a huge amount of ambivalence, ranging from those who wholeheartedly condemn the entire period to those who retain considerable positive feelings about their life experiences under the Soviet regime. The conflict between personal feelings and public memory of the Soviet period, or simply finding someone interested in their life during Soviet times at all, can sometimes render respondents literally speechless (as Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck points out), unable or unwilling to speak of their experiences, sometimes leaving the interviewer to fill in any gaps evident in the narrative.

The success of oral history also depends, in part, on the personal skills and abilities of the respondents to present a narrative usable by the researcher, as well as the willingness and ability of the researcher to listen and 'hear' what is being said. The ability of the respondent to tell a story may prove to be more challenging in cultures with limited or specific oral traditions or in cases in which illiteracy has denied the respondent access to more broadly understood and shared storytelling conventions. Narration is itself shaped by familiarity with and understandings of established 'ways of telling', plot devices, folklore, local language codes, social conventions and cultural traditions. It is especially important that the researcher has an understanding of this at the stage of interpreting the recorded and transcribed interview data, as well as an awareness of the types of 'knowledge' that were taken to the interview by the listener.

Insiders/Outsiders: one of the key issues facing some of our contributors to this volume was what we could term here as the perceived gap between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ knowledge. This could be regarded here in terms of the consideration given to who has the best background knowledge to conduct the interview and to be received by the respondent: the ‘insider’ with the closer lived experience and a life course similar to that of the respondent or the ‘outsider’ who has learned about the subject through a process of scrupulous, meticulous and intricate research? The ‘insider’ is more generally considered to be the person who has a greater and shared cultural understanding and knowledge, but that may not be the case in reality. This assumption in itself has inherent pitfalls as it could lead to a tendency towards universalising from shared subjective experiences.

It was regarded as important that these oral history research projects and their component interviews were conducted by investigators who ‘spoke the same language’ as their respondents, and not simply in the most literal sense. Even in the literal sense, where the researchers did not speak the same actual language as their respondents, they were often accompanied by a native speaker to facilitate the interview process. ‘Speaking the same language’ also involves a shared understanding of the particular areas of interest investigated in the interview process, as Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck points out. Aurimas Svedas stresses the importance of his own background preparation in his intellectual history interview project on the role of the individual in history and history in the individual. To some extent, it goes without saying but is not always practised, that solid background preparation and a good knowledge of the subject in question are important elements in the conduct of oral history and this is often reflected in the most successful interviews.

Yet much more than this can sometimes be required. As the chapter by Sigita Kraniauskiene and Laima Zilinskiene highlights in terms of ‘time-restricted language codes’, the success of oral history depends to some extent also on a shared understanding, knowledge and even sociocultural and lived experience of the research topic under review. This is recognised not only in the example of gender and generational cohorts but also in our case studies in specific historical cohorts, by those who themselves lived through Soviet times and shared an understanding of its practices, meanings and terminologies. Yet it should also be acknowledged here that a shared life-course experience does not necessarily always translate into an in-depth historical knowledge and understanding, which may sometimes only be brought to the interview process by a skilled outsider who is willing to question and revise the received wisdom of the subject under review.

Further gaps in sociocultural understanding are identified in our case studies, for example in terms of the differing educational levels of the interviewer and respondent, as well as their background as urban or rural, metropolitan or provincial residents or their identifiers such as ethnicity and relationship status. In her chapter, Laura Olson points to the lack of shared cultural and moral understandings sometimes evident in the interviews she

conducted with rural women in post-Soviet Russia. In interviewing women, in particular, as illustrated by Yulia Gradszkova's study, the discussion of life course events may also be facilitated and enhanced by a shared experience of marriage, pregnancy, maternity practices and motherhood, for example.

The *insider/outsider* divide also comes into play again at the point of interpreting the raw interview data. As Ildiko Asztalos Morrell points out, it is important for the researcher to remain objective and 'at a distance' (the *outsider*) in the analysis, editing and annotation of oral history transcripts, and this may lead to the production of texts not always welcomed by the respondent (the *insider*). On a more straightforward level, even simply mirroring back to the respondent a complaint they made or an issue they raised in speaking may lead them to question this topic once they see it written down. What people say in private (during an interview) is not always what they would want to say, or have revealed, in public (in the published outcome). Karolina Koziura and Olena Lytovka also point out that it was important for their interviews to be conducted by an international team of 'outsider' researchers to avoid 'insider' bias (by a too-close association with the different national groups involved in their survey) in their data collection and interpretation.

Consent: researchers using oral history methods are required to gain the informed consent of their respondents before the interview takes place. The researcher has a duty to the respondent to explain the purpose and content of the interview, how the data will be stored in the short term or archived in the long term, the processes for approval of its contents and how the outcomes may be used in publications or other public media. It should also be explained to respondents that they have the right to withdraw their consent at any stage during the overall conduct of the research project. The granting of consent is most often achieved by asking the respondent to sign an approval form.

As a number of our case studies reveal, the granting of written consent was not always a straightforward process in these post-socialist countries with still strong memories of their recent Soviet past. Those who had grown up and spent most of their formative years living under the Soviet regime were not always willing to commit their approval to a signed piece of paper. There remains a lingering suspicion, especially amongst some of the older generation, about how such signed papers may be used in the future. Others simply reported that they found the signing of an official consent form to be unnecessary. Nevertheless, in most cases the consent, if not provided in written form, was included as part of the interview recording and was reaffirmed in the process of approval of the interview transcript.³ It has even been suggested that sometimes simply the willingness of the respondent to talk to the interviewer in itself forms a sufficient contract for consent to be assumed.⁴

A number of our contributors draw attention to the ethical issues involved in the reuse of already archived and/or published oral history and life-story transcripts. Some of our contributors used such materials to investigate

issues that had not been identified as the focus of the original interview or life-story submission for which the consent had already been granted. This was an issue faced by Maija Runcis in her study of housing allocation in the capital city of Riga in Soviet Latvia. Runcis points to the problems generated by the absence of the narrator and interviewer in archived life stories and she identifies the importance of showing an awareness of biographical and cultural backgrounds in the conduct of oral history research. In her study of the 'affective economy' of (romantic) love in Estonia, Leena Kurvet-Käassar cautions against the uncritical reading of archived narratives in order to avoid the risk of distorting the original account or assuming a degree of representativeness or universality from a single transcript.

Anonymity: Ethical guidelines and good practice in research dictate that the identity of respondents should be kept anonymous should the interviewees themselves wish this to be the case (although we should note, of course, that real names are also often used, particularly in 'life stories', with the agreement of the interview subject). Anonymity is often achieved by the interviewer or respondent choosing a different name or similar type of identifier, to be accompanied with the provision of only the scantest biographical details (sex and age, place of residence or work, for example as used in the chapter by Sigita Kraniuskiene and Laima Zilinskiene) in the published outcomes.

Yet, as a number of our contributors note in various contexts, the simple guarantee of maintaining the anonymity of individual respondents by using pseudonyms or other identifiers may not in itself always be sufficient. Extra care needs to be taken to protect anonymity when researchers are working with particularly small cohorts of possible respondents or when working with respondents who may be directly known to each other (as parts of family groups, kin networks or work colleagues, for example). As a number of the examples published in this volume demonstrate, this situation applies even in the case of whole countries, especially those with relatively small populations (such as Lithuania, with a population of approximately three million in 2013), where public figures could be easily identified by the inclusion of personal details relating to their post holding and profession, place of residence or family background, for example. Ingrida Gečienė notes in her chapter here that although the impact of her editorial intervention was some loss of authenticity in the transcript, this did serve to underpin the preservation of anonymity for her respondents. In addition, she also shows concern for the potentially harmful outcome to her respondents' reputations of her own decision to label her interpretation of their accounts as sometimes 'paradoxical'.

One of the less recognised benefits of anonymity, as Leena Kurvet Käassar points out in her chapter, is that it grants the respondent space to narrate what might otherwise remain an untold story. This might serve to grant the narrator a sense of agency over an issue which formerly left them feeling vulnerable or lacking in control, or in the case of the Soviet past may simply not have been publicly acknowledged. Anonymity in narration, therefore,

can also have an identifiable therapeutic impact and allow the storyteller to reclaim ownership over events in their past. In this regard, Ildiko Asztalos Morrell, in referring to the 'emancipatory potential of life stories', also points out that the straightforward narration of a past injustice can help restore a sense of self-respect in the respondent, without necessarily resorting to a public appeal for vengeance. The telling of autobiographical and life stories, then, not only provides 'information' to the researcher but also plays a part in the respondent's self-understanding and identity formation. Likewise, Kelly Hignett points to the 'humanising' effect of personal testimonies in her analysis of past illegalities and immorality arising from the study of socialist-era lawbreaking activities in East-Central Europe. Karolina Koziura and Olena Lytovka talk of the potential for oral history to 'heal the wounds of the past' in their study of women's memories of their experience of post-war forced displacement. As noted in their account, some of Koziura and Lytovka's respondents had been waiting their 'whole lives' for their stories to be voiced and heard.

Disclosure: researchers are strongly encouraged to confirm the content of interview transcripts with their respondents before the materials are used in any form of publication or public forum. This allows the respondent to identify and correct any unintentional errors that may have found their way into the interview and/or transcript, to provide further details and context to parts of the discussion that may otherwise remain unclear, to add new data and to explain the hidden meanings behind some of the points that may have been raised during the interview. This approval process also allows the respondent to identify passages in the transcript that they would not wish to see released in the public domain but which, nevertheless, may still provide vital information to the researcher.

This process in itself is not without its problems, as a number of our contributors note in the course of their own research. What happens, for example, if the respondents fail to 'see themselves' in the transcript presented to them, despite the fact that it provides an accurate written record of their interview? This was an issue faced by Aurimas Svedas in one of his series of interviews conducted with a number of notable Lithuanian cultural figures who already had established public profiles. Presenting only snippets of one's life through the interview process may distort the self-image of the respondent to such an extent that they cannot recognise the account as a true or full representation of their experience. The researcher is then left with the problem of what, if anything, can be done with the material they have been given, which may have taken a significant amount of time and effort to accumulate. This gives rise to an ethical question relating to the possible contested ownership of interview data: Does this belong to the respondent who originally provided it, or to the researcher who, in the phrase employed by Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, uses the material to 'create history'? Whoever takes ownership of the final product, publication or outcome must also take ultimate responsibility for its contents.

What would happen also in the event that the final disclosure of the interview transcripts, particularly in the publication process, would reveal comments of the various participants in the broader research project about one another, which otherwise may have remained secret or unsaid, and may cause distress to others? Such a situation often arises in the conduct of family history, for example where various respondents may offer conflicting accounts that bring into question the memories of other interview participants or where respondents may reveal long-hidden secrets to the interviewer that they do not wish to become known to other family members. This was a problem faced by Ildiko Asztalos Morrell in her interviews with two elderly women in Hungary related to each other through the marriage of their children. In attempting to ensure the confidentiality of both, how could she reveal to either one of the women what had been said about her by the other? In this case, the principle of disclosure was limited by the intimate connections of the interview cohort and was partly overcome by not presenting the published findings (now in a different language) to the respondents themselves.

In bringing this collection of case studies together, we aim to make a substantive contribution to the ongoing critical debates about ethics and methodology in the practice of oral history and memory studies. We make no claim here, however, that the ethical and methodological issues raised by the chapters that follow are unique or intrinsic to the post-socialist context in Russia, the Baltic States and Eastern Europe, although this region undoubtedly still remains significantly shaped by its own recent Soviet and socialist past even though more than a quarter of a century has passed since the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As Andrejs Plakans's discussion of methodological approaches in the writing of Latvian history in the post-Soviet period highlights, the historical profession in each of the countries under review in this volume is still trying to adapt to the writing of its own, often greatly contested, national history. Likewise, many individuals are still trying to come to terms with their own personal history and memories of the Soviet regime. The case studies that follow undoubtedly also highlight concerns that have broader relevance to all research engaging not only with oral history and memory studies, but also with life stories, narrative enquiry and interview data more generally.

NOTES

1. These points are drawn from a range of different sources that offer guidelines for the conduct of ethical research. The guidelines provided by the (UK) Oral History Society are available online: <http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics.php>. Other useful recent studies include Carolyn Ellis, 'Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others', *Qualitative Inquiry*, no. 1, vol. 13, 2007, pp. 3–29; Ken Plummer, *Documents of*

Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism, London: Sage, 2001, ch. 10; Rose Wiles, *What Are Qualitative Research Ethics?*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

2. For more information on the research value of 'silence', see Dalia Leinarte's contribution to this volume and her book, *Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality: Life Stories of Lithuanian Women, 1945–1970*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010, pp. 13–16.
3. I relied on this approach when I conducted interviews for my research, published as Melanie Ilic, *Life Stories of Soviet Women: the Interwar Generation*, London: Routledge, 2013.
4. On negotiating with respondents, see, for example, Robert L. Miller, *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories*, London: Sage, 2000, ch. 4.

Silence in Biographical Accounts and Life Stories

The Ethical Aspects of Interpretation

Dalia Leinarte

After the fall of communism, scholars in East and Central Europe agreed that we should rethink Marxist-Leninist concepts and attempt to reconstruct history with the help of well-documented sources. It was widely believed that the aspects of history that had been inaccessible and forbidden under the Soviet regime would naturally come to light once the archives were opened. Researchers in these former communist societies believed that in order to achieve a critical history, it was most important that ‘hard’ archival collections had to be accessed.

As Andrejs Plakans expertly reveals in his chapter, it soon became apparent that historians were operating with very few objective facts. The content of the majority of former Soviet archive documents was questionable and did not always provide the types of answers researchers were seeking. After this first, admittedly unsuccessful, search for ‘objective facts’, historians began to turn to one particular type of subjective source, that is to the memories of individuals who had lived through the Soviet period. However, even though publishers were by this time being provided with a steady flow of memoirs from survivors who had experienced Stalin’s repressions first-hand, from the very outset of the *perestroika* period, the conduct of *oral history* was not regarded as a method on equal footing with archival research, nor were interviews accepted as legitimate historical sources. Studies in *oral history* only began to reach the former Soviet republics about ten years after the collapse of the Soviet regime, and even these were mostly published outside the borders of the former Soviet republics.¹ These early books in *oral history* were not even translated into the local languages used by their authors to conduct the original interviews.

The distrust shown by East and Central European researchers of the *oral history* method was mostly determined by the subjectivity of the resulting interviews. Understandably, after 1991 people expected to read histories based on ‘hard archival evidence’ that would objectively reveal the hidden past. The suspicion surrounding interviews was also encouraged by the fact that silence played a key part in many of these accounts. Accordingly, silent pauses in interviews were interpreted as proof that *oral history* was

supposedly not capable of revealing the experiences of the Soviet period 'as they really were'.

In fact, silence and amnesia are common elements found in the majority of accounts provided by people who lived through the Soviet and communist period. When I personally conducted interviews with Lithuanian women, they offered coherent and detailed accounts of their lives up to the Soviet occupation in 1940 and during the Second World War and detailed specific versions of events that took place in Lithuania under Stalin's rule. However, in talking about their lives from the mid-1960s the narratives of my respondents turned into rather scant retellings accompanied by incoherence and long, silent pauses. The biographical accounts of this period remind me somewhat of ideological Soviet newspaper cuttings.² As Luisa Passerini has noted, a homogenous collective memory is in reality rather typical amongst the populations of totalitarian and authoritarian countries.³ On the other hand, when my respondents recalled Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the popular uprisings of the late 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union, their interviews again became coherent and spirited accounts.⁴

Silence or amnesia in interviews is an important component of *oral history* because the refusal and/or inability of respondents to talk can reveal unexpected aspects of history. At the same time, silence and its interpretation unavoidably give rise to ethical problems: what does silence mean in the life stories of people who lived through the Soviet period? Is it ethical for the researcher to interpret and attempt to reconstruct evident gaps in interview accounts? In an attempt to discuss these ethical questions, one of the essential tasks is to uncover what determines the prevalence of silence or amnesia in the interviews that were conducted in the former Soviet republics and Soviet bloc countries.

Silence can possibly be explained as the result of trauma, which was unavoidably experienced by the majority of the region's population. In the case of traumatic experiences, the respondents are silent because their aim is to hide or not disclose certain events. However, in the opinion of many historians and psychologists, even though such accounts are often incoherent and contain numerous silent pauses, the respondents, nevertheless, share their traumatic events 'between the lines' or by using ambiguous language.⁵ Scholars also note that even traumatized individuals sooner or later start to talk about their most painful biographical facts. Similarly, the Lithuanian women I interviewed remembered their post-war years just as coherently and thoroughly, despite the fact that these years were traumatic for hundreds of thousands of Lithuanian women. Many eyewitnesses or survivors of the most painful event of this era—the Holocaust—have also come forward to talk about the worst times of their lives.⁶

On the other hand, in the life stories of individuals who lived through the Soviet and communist regimes, silence does not necessarily have any hidden meaning at all. Silent pauses often appear not because the respondent

wishes to conceal certain information. Rather, silence often presents itself only because the individual has nothing to say. The theory of post-traumatic memory, therefore, does not seem to hold up when the respondent withholds details about everyday life in the communist era, appears to lie or seems incapable of providing a coherent narration of their own life story. In most cases these respondents assert that they are perfectly capable of telling 'how it all actually was'. Nevertheless, instead of a coherent retelling, they often convey their life stories in an incoherent and non-sequential manner. During interviews they often leave out many details and events despite being the contemporary eyewitnesses of communist regimes.

In the search for the reasons that lie behind this silence, sociologist Paolo Jedlowski's research on the memory of Italy's colonial past is interesting. According to Jedlowski, if events or entire historical periods are not given due significance in public discourse, they remain hidden in the individual's or society's subconscious. In other words, if certain events are not made to be meaningful publicly, people do not articulate and 'do not remember' them. In such cases, respondents remain silent or speak incoherently, giving inconsistent accounts. The aspects of history that are not publicly discussed, debated or given a sense of meaning, either in academic or in fictional literature, are termed by Jedlowski as having fallen into the 'spiral of silence'.⁷ According to Jedlowski, it is precisely the inexistence of a public discourse that can explain Italians' inability to speak about Italy's colonial past. Thus, the memory of ordinary Italians about their country's colonial past was never realized and never transpired to become a collective memory. It is only the types of memories that are acknowledged and presented in public discourse that can open ways to collective memory.

According to Jan Assman, no memory can preserve the past if it is not reconstructed within the framework of the present.⁸ After 1991 in the former Soviet Union and in the Soviet bloc countries, the goal was to rewrite the cultural and collective memory of the communist past. However, in many cases, public significance was given only to the political crimes of the communist regimes, such as deportations, exile, persecution and executions. Everyday life, including policies relating to the private sphere, remained outside the borders of public discourse. In the majority of post-communist countries, therefore, everyday life remained part of individual memory and did not have a collectively constructed narrative. For this reason, the everyday life stories gathered during interviews were often presented as incoherent accounts with numerous pauses, even though the respondents were certain that they knew and could talk about 'how it really was'.

One might ask why, under new democratic conditions, everyday lived experience under the yoke of communist regimes did not become the subject of memory politics. One of the most important reasons for this is that communist everyday life has, to this day, not in itself been identified as traumatic because 'trauma' is associated only with the crimes perpetrated by the political regimes. Meanwhile, according to Jeffrey Alexander, if certain aspects