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A CONDITIONAL PLURALITY OF MEMORY. ORAL HISTORIES OF THE POLISH PEOPLE'S ARMY SOLDIERS (On the Margin of the Book *Żołnierze ludowego Wojska Polskiego. Historie mówione**)

Abstract

This essay is inspired by a close reading of the recently published volume *Żołnierze ludowego Wojska Polskiego. Historie mówione* (Soldiers of the Polish people's Army. Oral histories) by Jarosław Pałka and Kaja Kaźmierska (Łódź, 2018) and continuously refers to it. Rather than a standard book review, it is a critical essay which positions this publication, and the documentation project standing behind it, in the context of Polish oral history research field. The latter has been expanding dynamically in recent years, gaining more and more recognition also among academic historians. One of its essential characteristics, to which this volume attests, is its methodological anchoring in biographical sociology. This field of research has a long academic tradition in Poland (though its current versions tend to adopt 'Western' ideas and research patterns) and offers scientific credibility to, still often insecure, oral history research. The text claims that scientific legitimisation of this kind does not necessarily lead to a convincing interpretation. The method, no matter how neutrally it may be presented, is not free from the authors' value judgements and non-source-based historical knowledge (and imagination). The text, therefore, suggests a reading of the book – which is vastly a selection of edited, historically footnoted and narratively ordered oral history sources (biographical narrative interviews with the title soldiers) – that partly goes against the authors' interpretations. Altogether, it makes up an exercise in (oral) historical hermeneutics.

Keywords: oral history, biographical sociology, military history, autobiographical/collective memory, Second World War, communism

* Kaja Kaźmierska and Jarosław Pałka, *Żołnierze ludowego Wojska Polskiego. Historie mówione* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego: Łódź, 2018, 454 pp.).

Contexts do matter, at times. I am writing this text in Łagów Lubuski, a charming locality in the west of Poland, some fifty kilometres away of the German border – situated in what is a gained and then, in the year 1945, formally obtained territory. I am working at the house of my long-deceased grandfather and grandmother, whose previous owners were some unknown German hosts, those who had built it: such is the case with almost all the buildings in the area. The historical circumstances that once made the place mine – and, in a deeper reflection, have contributed to who I actually am, in the most elementary, that is genetic dimension – are pretty obvious, and commonly known to Poles: not by way of school-based or media-operated instruction but, continuously, a family experience and intergenerational communication, which may be expected to last pretty long still. One non-isolated variant of the tangle of family ties of the region's (former) residents and their descendants is a combination of the experience related to Eastern Borderlands of prewar Poland with the wartime Siberia-related and military experiences. The latter aspect (no inverted commas, no adjective applied) meant serving with the Polish Army (labelled 'People's') and, in some cases, doing all the combat route 'from Lenino to Berlin' – and, when the war was over, turning into 'military settlers', bringing the family still staying 'in Siberia', all this being followed by a rather regular life on the geographic (and not only geographic) outskirts of post-war communist Poland – the 'People's Republic'.

A soldier with the Polish People's Army, my Grandpa never reached Berlin himself. In mid-April 1945, he and his mate fell into a trap somewhere near Budziszyn/Bautzen. Having 'miraculously' survived, badly hurt, he was removed to a field hospital behind the Odra/Oder River. At the moment the war ended, he was an officer ranked to a captain, and decided to settle in the emerging west of Poland. In the spring of 1946, he was joined by my Grandma with a few-year-old kid, my uncle, and some of the extended family. He left the Army's ranks and took hold of a large farm in Łagów Lubuski, and became a farmer – while Grandma worked as a tailor all her life.

My Grandpa died when I was a kid, just a few years old, and never happened to tell me any of his war stories. I know some of the most expressive ones from quite fragmentary reconstructions done by my family – my Grandpa reportedly did not talk much to his children about the past. He might have been satisfied with the company of his combat mates from wartime army, with whom he regularly frequented

the local canteen after the High Mass on Sundays. Grandma outlived him a quarter of a century. She would often recollect 'good people' she met during her stay in Siberia; some of them turned later on into settlers implanted from the East to the formerly-German West, much like herself and her husband.

What astonishes me today is how apolitical those dispersed family recollections were. Made up entirely of small stories – episodes, little interpersonal scenes, micro-portraits of ordinary people. Some of them utterly banal, some other extraordinary, none directly inscribed in the grand political History – as if the latter would have taken place on some distant field, ungraspable but evident to the protagonists of these stories; if not at the very time of occurring, then certainly from a later perspective. I did not notice that the transition of the year 1989 has ever updated, in any way whatsoever, my Grandma's Eastern Borderlands and Siberia-related recollections. She would be consistent in shunning any involvement in any groups that focus on brooding over and commemorating those experiences; she would stand aloof of their veteran-style institutionalisations. On the other hand, she would stick, for years and years, to a group of close friends from war and post-war years. What changed after the downfall of the Soviet Union was that contacts became easier and more frequent with their brothers and sisters who had stayed, formerly, in the USSR and now, in the country called Belarus. My grandfather died in 1986, in a military hospital in Żary (the military infrastructure in these territories is a *longue-durée* one); hence, he could not downgrade his wartime memories within a new framework of post-1989 official memory, mainly as it has evolved in the most recent years.

Having said that, it is understandable that I started reading the book *Żołnierze ludowego Wojska Polskiego. Historie mówione* [Soldiers of the Polish People's Army. Oral histories] by Kaja Kaźmierska and Jarosław Pałka not only for professional and/or social reasons. I wanted to hear the voices of people whose wartime experiences form part of the History shared by my ancestors. Contrary to the latter, the interviewees lived much longer and told much more – and they did it from the standpoint of a completely different historical and, primarily, memory-related moment.

These missing voices were glaringly absent in the increasingly numerous archives, documentary research studies, and publications of Polish oral history. The latter boasts an extensive and diverse output,

which cannot be discussed herein, even as a thumbnail sketch.¹ As far as the major historical experiences of the interlocutors, and their real-life experience, Polish oral-history research is mostly focused on the Second World War – and, primarily, on civil experiences of the war’s victims: Holocaust survivors, former prisoners/inmates of Nazi concentration camps and Soviet labour camps, Siberian exiles, forced labourers (of both sexes) in the Third Reich, diverse groups of displaced persons, deportees and migrants (including exiled/evacuated Germans). This list coincides and harmonises with the ‘grassroots’ quality of oral history – as a ‘history from below’, a history of ‘ordinary people’.

Soldiers, even if privates or troopers, are not intuitively associated with the said ‘bottom-up’ approach and ordinariness – probably because of their implied ‘historical causal power’. However, we do have valuable records of soldiers’ experiences in oral history archives and literature that has emerged in Poland in the recent years: these include testimonies of Warsaw Ghetto Uprising fighters² and Warsaw insurgents of 1944,³ Home Army soldiers and, to a lesser extent, members of other Underground (clandestine) organisations. There is – though much more modest – documentation and interpretation of oral warfront stories: those of soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West (particularly, of General Maczek’s Brigade⁴), and even of Poles who joined the Wehrmacht.⁵ The catalogue of these diverse wartime experiences is, clearly, neither complete nor isolable; at this moment I, therefore, point to the ones that became the object of particular, subject(-matter)-oriented, interest of Polish scholars,

¹ Of the synthetic texts published in the recent years, worth pointing out is the article by Dobrochna Kałwa, ‘Historia mówiona w polskich badaniach dziejów najnowszych’, *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej*, vii (2017), 163–84; <https://wrhm.pl/wrhm/article/view/171/105> [Accessed: 5 Aug. 2019]: a problem-oriented, theory-founded survey, with extensive bibliography.

² Anka Grupińska, *Ciągle po kole. Rozmowy z żołnierzami getta warszawskiego* (Wołowiec, 2013).

³ Warsaw Rising Museum’s Oral History Archive and research/education projects initiated by the institution.

⁴ Jarosław Pałka, Machteld Venken and Krzysztof M. Zalewski, *Żołnierze generała Maczka. Doświadczenie i pamięć wojny* (Gdańsk and Zakrzewo, 2013).

⁵ The ‘Dziadek z Wehrmachtu’ [My Wehrmacht Grandpa] project was carried out by the Genius Loci Association, in collaboration with the House for Polish-German Cooperation, in 2012–13.

documentarians, and popularisers of history who identify themselves with the oral history trend. The target on the subject nowise weakens the dominance of biographical narrative interview as the most common research method.⁶ The thing is to determine which of the biographical experiences of the interlocutors give the main reason for holding a meeting and register the interview.

Wartime experiences of the Polish Army (referred to as 'People's') have long stayed outside the catalogue of topics of interest or importance to oral history as it is pursued in Poland, despite its utterly clear the Second World War and Nazi/Soviet-occupation orientation.⁷ The main reason behind this exclusion is not hard to identify. The political-system transition commenced in 1989 implied – apart from all the other aspects of change or even, as it were, 'above' them – a symbolical reformatting done from higher-up. Significantly, on his establishment as President of the Republic of Poland in 1990, Lech Wałęsa took over the insignia of power and authority from Ryszard Kaczorowski, the London-based 'President-in-Exile', rather than from the one who was his direct predecessor – Wojciech Jaruzelski, physically present in Poland. General Jaruzelski legally preceded Wałęsa as President, holding the reinstated office⁸ by way of the Round Table compromise and consensus. A general with the Polish (People's) Army was overly unequivocally associable with the 'un-Polish' Poland which had to be given a wide berth from then on, while a symbolical continuity of authority was identified with the interwar period and the Underground State, as well as their postwar émigré epigones.

⁶ The reasons behind this domination and reservations against it have recently been identified and voiced by Jakub Gałęziowski, in his article 'Oral History and Biographical Method. Common Framework and Distinctions Resulting from Different Research Perspectives', *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej*, xv, 2 (2019), 76–103; http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/PL/Volume46/PSJ_15_2_Galeziowski.pdf [Accessed: 5 Aug. 2019].

⁷ I refer here to oral history defined by (audio)visual character of the source concerned. Should studies based on *written* accounts of 'witnesses of history' be taken into account, one book ought to be pointed out: Dominik Czapigo (ed.), *Berlingowcy. Żołnierze tragiczni*, Wydawnictwo RM, Ośrodek KARTA (2015).

⁸ Wojciech Jaruzelski was elected President of the People's Republic of Poland [PRL] by the National Assembly on 19 July 1989; since 1 December 1989, as the State was officially renamed, he became President of the Republic of Poland [RP]—the office he held till 22 December 1990. He was succeeded by Lech Wałęsa, elected President through general election.

What was happening in the upper tiers coincided with down-tier occurrences, less noisy or spectacular. ‘Grassroots’ studies in oral history were part of the trend – not owing to the favourable political conditions but implied by the rightly-recognised need to give the floor to those had never been allowed to speak. Not coincidentally at all, the first large project of Polish oral history (the name was not in use yet at the time) was the KARTA Centre’s recording series focused on memories of former inmates of Soviet labour camps and exiles – an initiative that led to the emergence of what was called the Eastern Archive (*Archiwum Wschodnie*).⁹

It took time before we realised that the bottom-up nature of oral history is not merely about giving voice to the individuals whose historical experiences had been marginalised or excluded from the main currents of historiography and officially shaped collective memory. It is also about seeking for new, other than formulaic and dominant, interpretations of individual biographical experiences – and, historical experiences, as if by the way: interpretations that are subjective, individual, private, and often deeply personal. While these two attitudes are not mutually exclusive, their persuasive orientation (so to put it) is clearly different. In the former case, ‘filling the gaps’ in historical knowledge (or ignorance) is sought; in the latter, the bet is placed on building alternative historical interpretations, developing anthropological attentiveness and existential sensitivity; posing or asking difficult questions, rather than cementing the answers.

It was in this very spirit that I have read the intentions behind the book based on oral histories of soldiers of the Polish People’s Army. I was aware of how tough it was for the authors to do their work, to compile the study that finally came out. Jarosław Pałka, joined at a later date by Kaja Kaźmierska, sought for years to obtain a funding for their documentary study project that would enable to record and process a series of biographical interviews with former soldiers of the Army. However, despite the applicant’s unquestionable output and proven experience, neither their memory-related (the need to record/write-down important experiences of a fading generation) nor scientific arguments (the opportunity for a methodologically innovative analysis of accounts of soldiers whose experiences were

⁹ See <https://karta.org.pl/aktualnosci/archiwum-wschodnie> [Accessed: 5 Aug. 2019].

mainly known to us from ideology-laden studies from before 1989) met with understanding. The institutions they requested for assistance rejected, one by one, their grant applications, under any pretext. The rejections were too numerous, their justifications overly awkward and clumsy, not to identify a reflection of the current condition of collective memory – not to say, politics of history. The interviews were eventually recorded and processed without a regular research grant, thanks to the determined attitude of the authors and support provided by their mother institutions – the Warsaw-based History Meeting House and the University of Łódź's, Chair of Sociology of Culture.

The cover features two names of the authors, and it is they who take responsibility for the work and its (as-published) effect. However, as is usual with oral history undertakings, the individuals whose narratives are comprised in the book have co-authored it¹⁰; all those taking part in the recording sessions and those who processed the testimonies in writing are the contributors as well. Oral history is a subject-centred and highly dialogical practice: recollections or memories are not 'collected' but rather, extracted, distilled through the interview conversation. Immensely much depends on *who* does the interviewing, and *how* actually s/he does it. Lastly, all those who have written down and edited the interviews, and, primarily, those who finally composed the book based on the thus-prepared material (thirteen interviews have been used, out of forty-plus recorded). Rather than denying the authorship of those whose names are featured on the cover, I am trying to show how complex a venture – logistically and inter-personally – an oral histories-based research project, turned into a book form, is.

Trust is the *sine-qua-non* for such a project to be carried out. Mutual trust is of core importance for the 'history witnesses' telling their experiences to their active and involved listeners, and researchers. There is no oral history whatsoever without such elementary trust. The current state of collective memory is an important external context in which the talks take place – so unfriendly today for the 'people's' soldiers. All those involved in the recording of the interviews deserve considerable merit as they succeeded in winning their interlocutors' trust.

¹⁰ The authorship of oral history interviews is an ever-recurrent issue, never satisfactorily resolved to date. For the most recent arguments in this respect, see Wojciech Kucharski, 'Autorstwo i prawa autorskie do relacji *oral history* w Polsce', *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej*, 8 (2018), 7–28.

The authors repeatedly point this fact out in the introduction, stressing the veteran milieu's favourable attitude to the project as such, and the ease with which they were permitted by the interviewees to get the accounts published – in most of the cases a telephone talk sufficed, without the interviewee having read the transcript. Another measure of the trust is the length of the interviews conducted: on average, they would last five to six hours each, the longest of them exceeding ten hours. As we can moreover learn from the introduction, for a number of interviewees it was the first opportunity they were given to present a comprehensive story of their lives – and thus, to being listened to so attentively.

However, the primary proof of trust is, to my mind, the very content of the testimonies recorded in the project – not just in the book, as those which were not included are quite akin content-wise, and no less unique. What I mean is not only what we can read in the introduction – that any biography is one-and-only owing to the way in which wartime experiences are experienced, the selection of the threads, the language of the description, the sensitivity and the manner in which warfront situations are dealt with and psychologically or mentally processed (p. 41). The singularity is even more powerful, as it has to do with the existential aspect, penetrates down to the level of border experiences in which these individuals were once confronted with death. In some cases, the threshold of self-identification is crossed. These interlocutors refer to warfront situations in which they participated, actively and causatively (many of these accounts are battlefield stories, with an astounding density of occurrences), while feeling that it was *not* them that actually acted; things happened and occurred *through* them. They identify for themselves how 'automatic' their behaviours were: "... in the course of an action, an attack, you are switched-off then: no man any more, just a piece of machinery. This is what I call it" (pp. 263–4). Thus, automatism on the behavioural level. The soldiers' testimonies reveal more of its varieties: surrendering to the group's pressure, yielding to the most negative (group and individual) emotion, to physiological needs and 'instincts'. Offering such an honest and fair story about oneself attests to trust toward the listener and researcher, and is an act of courage.

There are many moments like this in these testimonies. I deem them to be particularly valuable, for they provoke universal questions about 'situation-driven behaviour' – not limited to Polish members of the

'People's' Army, 'Soviets' in the Red Army, or Germans in the Wehrmacht. Such thoughts come to my mind also when I read the parts of the accounts (probably, even more numerous) where the interlocutors show how historically incidental their soldierly way was. First, how they ever joined the ranks of the Polish 'People's' Army, and then, where they got to, with whom and in what conditions they fought, and what their lot was. This might be read as an attempt to excuse oneself – in anticipation of the unwise accusations of having joined the 'improper' party, or, as an invitation to reflect upon the causal power of ordinary humans, of an ordinary man under war circumstances. "Man can nowise influence his own fate. No way. This is something that happens, rolling about like some grand machinery, and the man is like a tiny particle – and who would care about a particle. When war is on, who would dare to say 'It is now *me* to choose'? No, there is someone else in control." (p. 287)

These two close-ups entail questions about gradually becoming a full-fledged soldier, getting involved in the fighting: physically, behaviourally, but also on idea-oriented, or outright ideological premises; about the biographical road from incidentally becoming a soldier to acting or behaving automatically in the battlefield. And then on, from the warfront 'naturalism' to diverse varieties of ideological 'patriotism', which have given all these experiences a cohesive sense and meaning – be it, apparent sense or meaning. This road was circular, for both processes were overlapping already during the war and in the time of fighting. The warfront horrors and nightmares called for compensation; one way of bringing it about was the myth of Recovered Territories (former German lands in what is today the west and north of Poland). This myth was real as it was put into practice.

It is worth holding in mind while reading this book, that what we come across is records of biographical stories of quite aged men, about ninety years of age at the moment of the interview. They are aware that they are telling a story of their lives perhaps for the very last time (though for the first time in such a comprehensive manner) – this being their oral, historical testament. Not entirely private, though, for it would be put in an archive and used for scientific research purposes, but all the same quite personal in some moments. The wartime – and, especially, warfront – experience was the most crucial experience in these interviewees' lives. Furthermore, it was the most tragic one, as it implied facing death – accidental, mass-scale, nonsensical. They have

compensated this experience in a variety of ways, of which those easiest accessible tended to be coincident with (or, prompted and inspired by) what is called today – in bulk, without nuance – ‘communist propaganda’. Now, they oppose such simplifications and clearly express it – mostly, toward the interview’s end. What they want to tell us, without pretending to have been some heroes that they once happened to participate in something really horrid and important at the same time. And – that it did make sense. Well, it had to, since they have survived – contrary to so many others, around them – and lived their ‘ordinary lives’ when the war was over – like so many others around, in the world as it was, in the country they had. They persuade us that, during the war, they fought for the country as it could emerge one day – whatever it would have been like.

At this point, they speak one voice, though they differ in views and opinions in many ways. Coming from various parts of prewar Poland – some from what was the Eastern Borderlands, others from eastern or central parts of today’s Poland; being of various communities, social classes and worlds – peasant, landowning, through to intelligentsia – and of diverse worldviews and political preferences (if already crystallised at that point), they performed different jobs (some stayed in the army after the war, but for no more than a few years) and differed in their attitudes towards the post-war political system and authorities, and subsequently, to the Solidarity upheaval and the transition of 1989.

The war and the warfront service done with the Polish People’s Army became the generational experience for them, and one that strongly integrated their community, changing their lives and making them mostly shared and familiar – also, or perhaps primarily, in the symbolic aspect. This is expressly reflected in the composition of the book under review. Each of the biographies concerned is divided into three (unequal) parts which, taken together, form the three main sections: Chapter II – ‘First years of the War – before the formation of the Polish People’s Army’; Chap. III – ‘With the Polish People’s Army, at war’; Chap. IV – ‘After the War’. The book can be read in the usual way – page by page, section by section; or, in line with the particular biographies, following the stories told by the protagonists (two accounts by female interviewees, very moving, are included). References to the relevant pages attached at the end of each fragment much facilitate the latter method of reading. This composition of

'biographical material' is already known to us from other oral history publications (the direct inspiration came from Joanna Wiszniewicz's study on the March '68 generation *Życie przecięte. Opowieści pokolenia Marca*, Wołowiec 2018). It appears to fit ideally once again, as it facilitates the parallel perception of a historical process (history 'on the run') and individual biographical processes (biography 'as it occurs'). To my mind, it extremely clearly shows, probably somewhat contrary to the authors' conscious intention, the deep sources of legitimacy of post-war Polish state within its new borders – deep, as they related to wartime border experiences. Violence, propaganda, and conformities were not the only premises based on which post-war Poland and its authorities were legitimised.

It was only after I read these interviews with soldiers that I understood – for all the reasons specified above – how much our oral history missed this particular, the most mass-scale, military and warfront experience of combat in the ranks of Polish People's Army¹¹ and, subsequently, of living with the memory of this experience in post-war Poland. With the top-down controlled and repeatedly manipulated, for propaganda purposes, presence of this experience in post-war communist Poland (the 'People's Republic'), it was unfairly and for too long pushed off to the margin of interest of oral history or biographical sociology after 1989 (before then, none of these research areas existed, as they are comprehended today). Perhaps, however, looking from the standpoint of the storytellers, the witnesses of history, rather than the interviewers, it has been worthwhile to wait till the very late days in the lives of these soldiers to hear, and then write down, the experiences and stories of the sort as successfully recorded, archived, and published in the book under discussion.

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Rather than being a selection of oral history sources – commented upon, equipped with an introduction and explanatory notes – the book is a scholarly study authored by two researchers whose names are specified on the cover. However, what I have said so far pertains basically to the 'source section'. While it is overwhelming in volume terms, many of its fragments piercing, and its general message pretty

¹¹ One of very few exceptions of making this experience visible today, though based on written memoirs, not oral histories, is: Czapigo (ed.), *Berlingowcy*.

instructive, the said section does not exhaust the reader's impression. In any case, my own impression as a reader is not homogeneous.

Except for the excellent and immense documentary, conceptual and editorial work of all the involved individuals, which made 'missing' testimonies of the soldiers part of Polish oral history's circulation (and, hopefully, historiography and memory studies in general), the presence of the authors is particularly revealed in the opening section – Chapter I – entitled 'Between history and memory', in the introductions to the 'source-oriented' chapters II to IV, and in the quite numerous and, at times, pretty detailed notes to diverse fragments of the accounts.

Apart from its purely informative function, the opening section, as expected, sets the biographical testimonies in question in the framework of scientific analysis. While the authors treat oral history and biographical sociology (in particular, biographical narrative interview, as conceptualised by Fritz Schütze) as 'research methods', memory studies form the background methodology – which is particularly true for the categorising differentiation between communicative memory and cultural memory, as proposed by Jan Assmann and quite popular in this research field today. Highly important is also the sociological concept of generation in terms of Karl Mannheim's classical concept.

This methodological and theoretical foundation of the study raises no doubts, though not all the readers would probably be equally interested. However, the authors go further than that: reading the consecutive pages of the opening chapter, I feel increasingly *warned* against reading the subsequent sections of their study. To be precise, the warning concerns an overly forthright or naïve reading of the following soldiers' testimonies – as they would be highly suspicious, built upon an outdated and disgraced historical memory, mythologised, or, simply, manipulated by the communist propaganda and, putting it straight forward, mendacious. Nonetheless, the authors would do their best, we are assured, to set these (hi)stories straight: "What we deal with is an account of witnesses who once had, more or less consciously, been entangled in the [communist] system and they lend their voice to it, more or less intentionally" (p. 25).

The chapter's final section offers us a detailed, though exemplary (so, there are many more of them, we should suspect), breakdown of the strategies of the narrators' presentation of their biographical experiences, showing how a number of them deal with the sense of their undeserved (as they believe themselves) infamy. In their

struggle for memory, the interlocutors tend apparently to commit acts of “degrading the actions of the others”, “legitimising the existing *status quo* – as, for instance, by stating that ‘this is how the war went on’”, “relativising the reality”, “finding excuse for one’s own actions by adopting ready-to-use interpretations of reality”, “applying certain strategies of presentation of one’s own biography”, “sustaining the legitimacy of one’s own history”, “positioning oneself as a victim to the system” (pp. 43–9). Each of these narrative ‘strategies’ (called so, without inverted commas, by the authors, thus suggesting an intentional manipulation) is briefly discussed and illustrated with fragments of the interviews to be extensively quoted on the following pages.

As we further on read extensive fragments of the soldiers’ testimonies that form the core, source-based part of the book, we repeatedly come across a note reminding us to stay suspiciously vigilant with respect to the words uttered by the narrators. What I mean here is not the numerous, and definitely dominant, historical notes/comments which complement the testimonies and correct errors or inaccuracies occurring in them, offering true expert knowledge. (A mostly neutral, informative function is the case with most of the concise historical introductions to the ‘source-centred’ chapters.)

What I do mean, though, is the less numerous but conspicuous notes that call upon the reader not to forget the interpretive instructions from Chapter 1, keeping suspicious vigilance over what the narrators are saying – be it certain descriptions or phrases they unwittingly tend to use (‘gangs’, ‘Soviet Union’ – in the once-official rendering as ‘*bandy*’ and ‘*Związek Radziecki*’), or their proposed historical generalisations which they apparently use to persuade their listeners and, consequently, readers, in the argumentative sections of the interviews (as when criticising the decision to start the rising in Warsaw in August 1944, or approving of the post-war shift of Poland’s borders).

I am irritated, I must admit, by such a method of ‘scientificisation’ of oral history, which is based on incessantly demonstrating an ideological entanglement of the narrators. The reason is not that I personally sympathise more with the historical interpretations proposed by the witnesses of history than those suggested by the authors of the study (sometimes yes, and sometimes not). The point is, I cannot really identify and appreciate any effort the authors would have made to understand their interlocutors. And, let me frankly say that expecting

from the narrators that they might 'deny' their language – in the name of the presently prevalent interpretation of historical truth (as it is seen by the authors) – and start referring to the 'independence-oriented Underground' or 'Soviet Union' rendered, as is customary the last thirty-odd years, 'Związek Sowiecki'; glorify the Warsaw Rising of 1944, or, deconstruct the 'Regained Territories' mythology, is what I deem completely unrealistic – and unnecessary. Why, and what for, should they make such an interpretive about-face in their old age? For them, it is not merely a matter of a historical narrative (though they do formulate such narratives and try to convince the others to accept them), but one of personal biographical experience – the one that matters the most in their lives. There is nothing out-of-the-ordinary in the fact that now, toward the end of their lives, they attempt to reinforce it, rather than undermine its sense or its purpose, not only in a private dimension. And this is what they actually do – in a variety of ways, sometimes getting caught by interpretive boilerplates, ideology-imbued language. Like everybody else, I should say, and soldiers in particular: for killing people (also, getting killed, and surviving) has to be somehow explained to oneself and to others, with some Big Cause as the propelling force.

My impression is that the authors, oversensitive about the truthfulness of grand historical narratives and the didactic function of the work they do, have somehow lost the sight of minor narratives and, together with them, their interlocutors' actual experiences. Nevertheless, an overwhelming part of the stories (more precisely, a significant share of each of them) told by the Polish People's Army soldiers they had made us acquainted with are small narrations, biographical micro-histories, bottom-up oral histories of quite ordinary people – much closer to their individual experiences than to a grand History (the one currently considered the truest). I am not saying that attempting to bargain and reconcile such micro-histories with a variant of the History is pointless; in such a case, some boundary conditions of such negotiation, a 'theory' behind it, is worth proposing. But the authors of the book under review make a great leap forward in that they unambiguously *subordinate* the presented oral histories to the History of the Polish People's Army *they* are writing – a history whose genuineness is reconciled entirely outside, or above, these histories.

To achieve this, they abandon the 'hermeneutics of trust', which otherwise is the foundation of oral history and without which no

such testimonies of 'people's' soldiers would have ever occurred (as can be read in the book and listened to at the History Meeting House's Oral History Archive), in favour of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Should the latter be identified with a 'critique of sources' – the foundation of any historiographical labour – then *oral history* would not be reconcilable with classical (classically truth-based) historical narratives. Somewhat accidentally, the book under analysis implies such fundamental questions.

The turn of hermeneutics is quite overt in this particular case, as the voice(s) of the interlocutors/narrators and the voice of the author are clearly separated. Whereas it is the latter that attach the historical rightness to themselves, the reader can choose which of the voices, or options, to follow. An instructive quotation from Paul Ricoeur (the same one who extensively wrote on both hermeneutics just mentioned) is made the book's motto: "History is history to the extent that it does not lead to an absolute discourse or absolute uniqueness; history is history only when its sense remains clumsy and convoluted." Let me encourage the readers of this remarkable book to read the stories of Polish People's Army soldiers published in it without the explanations, disentanglements and clarifications offered by the authors, in the first place. I would suggest that the proposed analyses be seen as just one method of interpreting and evaluating these poignant testimonies.

trans. Tristan Korecki

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