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The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe

Deniz Bingol McDonald

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Reviews

James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2010, xxviii + 312pp., £30.00 h/b.

AS THE TITLE OF JAMES MARK'S BOOK SUGGESTS, post-communist revolutions are incomplete unless the memory 'wars' in political, cultural and judicial spaces are resolved. The book is structured into seven chapters; Chapters One to Three deal with state institutions constructing collective pasts, while Chapters Four to Seven take up how individual pasts are refashioned according to the ideological requirements of post-communism.

In Chapters One and Two, Mark tackles the theme of unfinished revolutions by contrasting the Hungarian and Polish cases, both sites of 'negotiated transitions'. In Hungary's case, the question of whether '1956 is fulfilled' or 'betrayed' remains, while the survival of ex-communists after 1989 was seen as a success of the negotiated transition and a testament to the power of Solidarity for being able to convert former communists into democrats (p. 13). In this chapter Mark concludes that stories of resistance and revolution could not easily be invoked to form a foundation myth for the new political regime. Mark writes in Chapter Two that dealing with authoritarian pasts 'required open, public and official truth-telling procedures that addressed the experience of past criminality, violence and social complicity' (p. 31). The Romanian Presidential Commission and Polish Institute of National Memory are institutions that were mandated to carry out two tasks: firstly to regulate access to files and secondly (and less modestly) to produce a liberal Western-minded citizenry. They were two interlocutors of the political will to 'complete the revolution in terms of providing a new liberal collective memory' (pp. 31–2) and provide a unitary interpretation of the past that would bind a post-communist population to democratic development. In terms of methodology and mandate, perhaps a more meaningful comparison could have been made between the Polish Institute and the Hungarian 1956 Institute. That said, Mark ties up the loose ends and manages to focus on his central question.

Chapters Three and Four, entitled 'Criminalizing Communism' and 'Containing Fascism', evaluate the sites of memorials, museums and statue parks in Central Europe (Hungary and Romania) and in the three Baltic states and argue that they try to provide a cultural trial for those victims of totalitarianism who did not receive personal justice. Mark explains that the 'House of Terror' (which served both the Hungarian Arrow Cross and the Communist Security Services) fails to treat the narratives of fascism and communism fairly: it draws on the fascist past in so far as it could demonise communism by association, but 'removes it from sight' (p. 79) whenever the power of its memory threatens to undermine anti-communist accounts. The sites of terror try to reconstruct the victim of communism by simplifying the individuals' lives and sufferings to brutalised 'objects' of the ousted regime with the help of cinematic special effects (p. 66).

Mark neatly describes how the arrangement of the many communist-era statues and monuments in the statue parks of Budapest, Hungary and Grutas, Lithuania lessens the impact of these symbols. Mark argues in the following chapter (Chapter Four) that the Museums of Occupation in the Baltic Republics tend to exclude and marginalise the past of

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native fascism when they threaten to undermine the ideological message of the 'Soviet genocide' (p. 102). Paradoxically, Mark argues that membership of transatlantic organisations, such as the EU and NATO, necessitated that Holocaust history would be more central to Baltic national histories.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven take a different route and centre on the refashioning of personal pasts. The author makes great use of his interviews with Communist Party members born between 1918 and 1942. Mark allows the 'victims' to reclaim in their own words their identities from the political and state-sponsored memories. In 'Remaking of Autobiographies' (Chapter Five), some of the interviewees present themselves as the true inheritors of the anti-fascist struggle, described as 'writing oneself just to fit in' (p. 164).

The real strength of these chapters is how they show the autobiographies as a continuation of the refashioning of personal pasts from the communist period to the post-communist period. These autobiographies now 'had to anticipate democracy and liberal ideas' (p. 165). The colour and richness captured by these chapters shine through as one reads the differing approaches to the rewriting of people's résumés. Chapter Seven, dealing with the case of Red Army rapes in Hungary, asks whether the revival of the public memory about Red Army rape of Eastern European women could encourage the individual women to go public with their memories.

In the final chapter, James Mark concludes that building memories from above in a monolithic fashion was one of the legacies of authoritarian impulses. These legacies show themselves in the interviewed individuals, as they carry the same politicised and divisive autobiographical habits with them into the post-1989 era. Remaking the past from above in the post-communist landscape attempts to build a new unifying national memory that is believed to heal past divides and underpin a new liberal, democratic identity. The unheroic, exclusive and elitist nature of some of the post-1989 negotiations made such mythologisations difficult. At the end of the book the reader may ask whether all those societies which have experienced totalitarianism and gone through regime change remain divided. Although Mark does not elucidate why Eastern European experiences stand out, the book is an erudite comparison of how various pasts are remembered. It is an engaging and accessible work, which should attract a wider audience than just historians of transition.

Kadir Has University DENIZ BINGOL MCDONALD © 2012

Tanja Penter, *Kohle für Stalin und Hitler: Arbeiten und Leben im Donbass 1929 bis 1953*. Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2010, 468pp., €54.00 h/b.

IN HER FASCINATING ACCOUNT OF THE MAJOR SOVIET COAL mining region in Ukraine, the Donbas, under the rule of Stalin and Hitler, Tanja Penter covers a great range of topics. After a short introduction and a brief overview of the history of the Donbas before the beginning of the Stalinist industrialisation drive, the author explores in depth social and economic history, everyday experiences, famines, propaganda, culture, female labour and terror, to name but a few themes. After three equally long parts dealing with the Stalinist 1930s, German occupation and the post-war period until 1953, Penter sums up her findings in an enlightening conclusion. The book is based on extensive archival research in Ukraine, Russia, Germany and the USA and the relevant literature in different languages. Further on, the author makes use of some ego-documents and interviews with eye-witnesses. Penter is well aware of recent trends in historiography on Stalinism and on the German occupation in the Soviet Union. In addition, she also stands in the German tradition of writing the history of major industrial regions, pioneered for the Ruhr. Thus she can present the reader with an impressive amount of