



## WITHIN AND BEYOND: ORAL HISTORY IN RUSSIA

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### SOME GENERAL REMARKS

Any review of the current state-of-the art in any scholarly field requires some historical remarks. Since doing science (including humanities) is a cultural practice, the legitimating of any discipline means the creation of its roots and foundations. I'm not going to discuss the process of "creating the discipline" here, but I'd like to bring up a few points on the international history of oral history studies to make the Russian case more clear and my own views more evident.

The founding declaration of oral history itself was made much later, after the general taxonomy of the social sciences was acknowledged, approved and confirmed. Even the struggles for "sociology" and "anthropology" had passed when the first appeals for the new field of oral history were pronounced. Oral history was raised as a public voice, a loud-speaker and a microphone for those who had no other means of telling their histories. Such a social turn was firmly tied to the broader processes of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: human rights movements, youth movements, etc. Oral history was not interested in merely offering people the chance to tell their histories; it wanted these stories to provide new, alternative viewpoints to the official historical writing. The idea was not just to share the individual understandings of the past with a wider audience, but to make the multiple memoirs equal to *the grand historical narrative*. More or less simultaneously with the rise of interest to memory studies (1) and its relationship to the study of history, some important developments in the academic world were under way: the so called "pragmatic turn" in history studies itself and the "linguistic turn" in social sciences. These developments brought attention to "other" voices about the past.

These voices were heard or even initiated by active leaders whose primary goals were far beyond the narrow descriptions of peculiar historical issues. In the preface to his book: *The Gateway to History* (1938), which predates the official foundation

of the first Oral History Research Office at Columbia University by 10 years, Allan Nevins, the founder of the research office wrote:

The volume is written by an amateur of history in the hope that it may aid other amateurs. When I say that I am in amateur standing I do not mean that my affection for history is of recent date or has not passed through several phases. It began when I was a child in an Illinois farmhouse, reading Macaulay and Parkman (for the family library was sizable and austere serious) on the rainy days that meant a relief from labor; and it has continued ever since. At first my liking for history was simply for the stories it told and the scenes it painted. A little later, as a newspaperman, I tried to apply some of it to current events. Later still I have had the task of teaching it. I have come to wish both that more people read history, and that more of them did so with feeling and passion, not as a means to a limited end. I have come to wish also that history was a little freer – that readers and writers alike would abstain from fettering it with dogmas, and let it be as varied, mutable, catholic, and progressive as so great a branch of literature ought to be. Here I have tried, without worrying about that pseudo-philosophic jargon upon Historismus, frames of reference, patterns of culture, and cyclical phases of causation which I no more understand than do most of its users, to provide a very Doric entrance to the historical domain. I have tried to help some general readers to realize how much history has been written for them; what a wealth of talent and even genius has been poured into it; what a tremendous conquest of perplexities and obstacles it represents; and how pregnant with ideas the best of it is. (Nevins 1938, iii.)

The web-site of Oral History Research Office of Columbia University states, “associates of Allan Nevins during his long career at Columbia (1928–1958) and later at the Huntington Library recall the man and the historian”. Allan Nevins was the man who wished to change the domain of history through introducing it to “general readers” as well as introducing “general readers” to it.

Shortly after the first challenge to oral history studies was resolved, the discussion on its validity began. The arguments of both sides in the dispute have been repeatedly observed and discussed. The point here is that the initial meaning of “oral history” was very literal, i.e. “the history which was told, not written”, but very soon it entered the scholarly discourse as a specific term for the technique and even discipline which had (or did not have) the right to exist on the map of the social sciences and humanities. In other words, the general meaning of the phrase was readily converted into the academic language where “history” means “the discipline that studies the chronological record of events (as affecting a nation or people), based on a critical examination of source materials and usually presenting an explanation of

their causes” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2006 [online]). The assertion of oral history studies as a scientific practice was taken as obvious and natural. And thus “Oral History” gained its capital letters.

The subsequent history of oral history studies developed along two lines where the first one was mostly bound to the civil activity and the second one lay in the sphere of professional legitimation. The latter implied the creation of respective departments at universities, publishing of appropriate text-books and journals and the appearance of corresponding indications in scientific indexes. The principal complexity of oral history studies on its way towards legal status was conditioned by necessity to struggle with history – the oldest and the most acknowledged scholarly branch. The competition for space was assigned by linguistic, rather than any other reality. It was language that determined the fatherland of the new academic technique. Though there were enough reasons for folklore studies and anthropology to contest validity of the oral history, they remained on different sides of the academic world for many years to come.

The first oral history periodical, *Oral History Review*, appeared as late as in 1966, 18 years after the founding of the Center at Columbia University. Later, in 1971, the *Oral History Journal* was launched. Until then, educational institutions had not had special departments of oral history neither within their history faculties or any other faculties.

It was only from the mid-1960s onwards, after the works of Jan Vansina (1961 [1965]), Ronald Grele (1975), Paul Thompson (1978), Alessandro Portelli (1985) and Luisa Passerini (1978, 1984 [1987]) were published that oral history studies could be seen separately from civil initiatives. However, it took a while before historians took this new trend seriously, and started to look at the past in ways that were outside the usual analogies and intersections.

## **HISTORICAL PARADOXES OF THE ORAL HISTORY STUDIES IN RUSSIA**

If you do a “Yahoo” search of the phrase “oral history” (which I did in early January, 2006) you will get a result of approximately 4,720,000 hits. There are dozens of manuals of oral history techniques which became popular instruments for teaching, socializing, solving communicational conflicts and research. In the US, one will undoubtedly find at least one Oral History Center per state.

If you try a “Yandex” search, which is now one of the most popular search systems in Russian-language Internet, you will only get 2,869 web-page hits with the “Oral History” (in Russian) word-combination. Oral history studies had its own history in Russia, completely separated from the Western one, which is also the case in several other scholarly fields.

This does not mean that oral history studies are something utterly new in Russia. Shortly after the Revolution, in the 1920s, the Commission for collecting and studying the historical materials of the October Revolution and the Russian Communist Party (*IstPart*) was created in the USSR. In the beginning, *IstPart* was confronted with a lack of sources to investigate. The solution to this problem lay in oral interviews of the eye-witnesses of the revolutionary events. A research program and special questionnaires were created for the project. The idea of writing down “living history” became very popular and was then used by some publishing houses and various societies (e.g. the Society of the old Bolsheviks, Commission for the history of the Red Guards and others). The initiative, which was so highly valued at the beginning of the new state, was already forbidden by the end of the 1920s. The practice itself, and the documents it produced were considered to be dangerous, and so *IstPart* was shut down in 1928 (Korneev 2005).

In the initial period of oral history, the meaning of “living histories” was mostly limited due to their role as a supplement to other available sources (2). Their alternative and subversive character was immediately taken by the audience as a point of confrontation between the official historical narrative and “other” histories. But if in the West it was the starting point for changes in both historical methodology and public appropriation of the past, in the USSR such an opposition was shortly put down. The method was later restored, but one never finds in Soviet academic publications any vivid debates similar to those in the West. Oral history studies (*ustnaia istorija* – this name was used in the Soviet scholarly discourse at least from the mid-1970’s onwards) were strictly placed into the sphere of archival studies and was associated primarily with collecting and preserving documents.

It can not be said that that international scholarship in oral history was unknown to Soviet academics. In the 1970s–1980s, a few professional reviews of the works in the field were published (Kuznetsova & Surinov 1980; Ursu 1989). D. P. Ursu presented the investigations of that period, including those by J. Vansina, D. Henige, P. Thompson, H. Hoover, and T. C. Barker. Moreover, he tried to create the national oral history historiography by linking it to Russian epic tradition. He mentions that the writers of Old-Russian chronicles, as well as the later historians of the 18–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, used oral histories in their investigations. D. P. Ursu attempted to reveal the intersections between folklore studies and historical uses of oral evidence underlying the inter-disciplinary character of oral history itself.

In the paper by N. D. Kurnosov (1987), we find detailed rules for the publication of oral interviews which only slightly differ from modern international conventions. He discusses the issues of syntaxes and orthography of the texts to be published and stressed the necessity to work towards presenting the interviews in their “spoken” form.

The position of oral histories among other types of sources, their relevancy in specific historical issues and linkage to oral tradition and knowledge of the community were discussed by T. A. Il’ina (1975), V. N. Surinov (1976), V. M. Vinogradov & A. B. Riabov (1986) and D. P. Ursu (1989). V. N. Surinov proposed a general

theoretical framework for the analysis of oral interviews. He defined their determinative significance in the context of other processes of source creation and information potential of historical research (Surinov 1976, 89).

Among the issues that Surinov had raised in his paper, there were aspects of memory aberration. He strongly emphasized the distortion of “real facts” in oral memoirs. He attempted to explain the phenomenon, and came to the now accepted conclusion about the dependence of narratives on the social, historical and communicative contexts of interviewing. He calls this phenomenon the “dynamics of social environment and social practice” (ibid., 97). Surinov used the archival materials of 19<sup>th</sup> century surveys of Siberian peasantry, which had been undertaken by the ministry for the state property in 1880s, as examples. The participants of the survey remembered that all the interviewed peasants were perfectly aware that the researchers were “higher-ups” and consequently they “felt the need to lie” (ibid., 98). Surinov was a professional historian whose main goal was to evaluate the oral evidence in respect to their validity in historical studies and a positivistic approach was essential to his views. He noted that the collected oral evidence could not be considered reliable for the purposes of the study. The main value of oral memoirs lies in the opportunity to investigate peoples’ reflections on the past:

[T]he process of interpreting the fact in historical, causal chain of the past, the very selection of the events which are historically important is going on in the definite temporal line, in this process the realization of the features of the memorialist, informant as the subject of the historical consciousness takes place (ibid.).

The original text is very hard to translate, especially since the contemporary terminology for describing these phenomena differs profoundly from one used by the Soviet authors of the 1970’s. However, I did not want to translate it into new terms, and tried to present it in the more or less original form.

Today the ideas of Surinov have scarcely any significance in terms of new insights on peoples’ accommodation of the past and the phenomenon of memory. Moreover, they do not even contribute to our understanding of the development of oral history studies, since the Soviet works in the field were isolated from the international scholarship. They are, however, substantial in a broad discussion of the Soviet and Russian historiography, that has for a long time existed in its own narrow space of findings, critics and discussions. Oral history studies are not very special in this sense, as similar examples can be found in many other scholarly fields. Cultural anthropology, anthropology of literacy, sociology of reading, and anthropology of religion – all these 20<sup>th</sup> century Western trends had their specific analogues in the Soviet humanities.

## ORAL HISTORY IN RUSSIA: THE NEW TRENDS

The fall of the iron curtain in 1990s brought about various processes in the academic field. The gap between “our” and “their” states-of-the art made some scholars search for ways of overcoming the cultural barrier, and the academic interaction between East and West soon picked up. The reflection on the distinctions went on in different speeds in different spheres. One could of course see obstinate resistance to new ideas in some places, but the financial dependence on Western funds, which shortly became clear to all participants of the scholarly market, became the key element of the transformation process.

During this period, Soviet historiography lost its value in almost all fields of Social Sciences. The main exceptions were the medieval studies, which were closely linked to Western scholarship from the 1960s onwards, owing to the contributions of A. Gurevitch and Yu. Bessmertny. The empirical results of these particular investigations still retain relevance for contemporary Russian scholars. But it seems that none of the theoretical frameworks elaborated during the Soviet times are popular or even used at the moment.

The same is true in the case of oral history studies in contemporary Russia. The younger academics that enter the field begin their work by examining Western literature, and the preceding Soviet tradition is mostly unknown. This fact is not subject to evaluation in terms of “good” and “bad”, but is meaningful for understanding the origins and backgrounds of modern studies.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that the contemporary oral history in Russia does not have any links to the preceding Soviet scholarship. It was created in 1990s and has, during the last decade, developed along the same lines as oral history studies in the West. The first impulse for “the creation” of oral history studies came from civil organizations, and they were used as an instrument for attracting the attention of a broader public to the history of particular population groups and particular historical events.

Shortly after the collapse of the USSR several such initiatives were started in former Soviet areas. In 1990–1992, the members of Moscow and St. Petersburg offices of the remedial organization “Memorial” began interviewing the members of dissident groups and other civil movements in the USSR. The results of the project, along with the collections of I. Khilkevich (interviews of the participants in the nonconformist activity in Odessa in the 1970s), and some other audio-materials are now kept in the archive of “Memorial”.

In the mid-1990s, the project on oral history of the independent Ukraine started in Kiev. It was a collaborative effort between journalists from Ukraine and Western countries who interviewed the leaders, participants and eye-witnesses of the events of 1985–1991. More than 70 political, cultural, religious leaders and journalists from Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, the United States and Canada were recorded in over 200 hours of videotapes (Kolomayets 1996; Mostovoi 1996).

Historians did not participate in the project but according to one of the authors, Micola Veresen, several of the foreign journalists had some experience in oral history studies (Mostovoi 1996).

The first steps of oral history studies in Russia were as an alternative to the official narrative. In the end of the 1990s, and especially in the beginning of the 21st century, the term became more and more widespread. Around that time, the Center for Visual Anthropology and Oral History at the Russian state university for Humanities (Moscow) and the Oral History Centers at the European University at St. Petersburg and at Petrozavodsk State University were created. The attempts to introduce the trend into the academic field faced the same problems as in the West. Traditional historical institutions refused to value the “new” approach to historical studies. That is why the first centers were created in the new universities, which were more oriented towards western scholarship, and not in the most famous state institutions of higher education such as Moscow and St. Petersburg state universities.

## **ORAL HISTORY AND HISTORY**

Nevertheless, a considerable number of young historians found the perspectives of oral history studies worth following. The field of history became one of the sources of intellectual development of oral history. The specialists with historical background initiated a project at the Kaliningrad state university on the recollections of Soviet migrants who settled in Eastern Prussia after the territory became a part of the USSR (see: *Vostochnaia Prussija* 2002). The researchers of the Oral History Center at the European University were teachers and PhD students of the Department of History. The Center at the Russian state university for Humanities is also oriented towards the development of historical methodology. The Petrozavodsk Center is affiliated with the Department of History, and was organized with the specific aim of collecting additional sources for historical research.

At the same time, specialists in other fields have taken an interest in oral history studies. One of the interested disciplines is sociology.

## **ORAL HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY**

The Institute of Sociology at the Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow) became the platform for a series of projects headed by Elena Mescherkina who focuses on the methods of biographical interviews. She has published a number of papers dedicated to the approach and its application to gender studies (Mescherkina 1999; Mescherkina et al. 1994; 2001). She also teaches a course on *Biographical Approach* at the Center for Sociological Education at the Institute of Sociology (Moscow).

The fact that oral history gained “support” from sociology has an explanation. Sociology was probably the first scholarly field in Russia that experienced the difference between the former Soviet practices and the new international approaches to research. It has relatively quickly adapted to the new environment and has turned to the modern techniques and methods in developing its background.

## **ORAL HISTORY AND HUMANITIES**

Sociology is not, however, the only field that gave resources – both intellectual and material – to the new trend. There is one more peculiar feature of the Russian situation in the sphere of oral history studies. The 1990s were the time of increasing attention towards the variety of approaches elaborated in the West during the Soviet times. Cultural history, performance-oriented approach to folklore studies and the history and anthropology of every-day life became more familiar and popular to Russian scholars. Consequently, many academics who worked in traditional research institutions in the fields of folklore studies, literature and ethnography found themselves already occupying the space of oral history studies. This meant that the familiarity with the methods and techniques of oral history studies supplemented the experience of many scholars who already saw themselves as oral historians.

This is perfectly illustrated in the joint project of the Karelian Institute (University of Joensuu, Finland) and the European University at St. Petersburg which focused on the process of adaptation of the Soviet migrants in the territory of former Finnish Karelia after World War II (3). The previous experience of all the scholars who took part in the project had been in the fields of ethnography and folklore studies. In recent years, the traditional field expeditions of the Department of Ethnography and Anthropology (Faculty of History, St. Petersburg State University) have tended to focus on oral history. One section of the Fifth Congress of Ethnographers and Anthropologists of Russia (Omsk, 2003) was titled “Oral history as source and method of ethnographic research” (4).

## **THE MAJOR RESEARCH THEMES**

The range of research topics under discussion in Russia covers several fields: local history, i.e. the recollection of the past of a particular city or place; collective war memories and the biographies of the representatives of various social groups.

One of the projects dealing with local history is the “Oral History of Perm”, which was undertaken in the framework of “the public museum of Oral History” of the “Yuriatin” fund (see: < <http://yuryatin.psu.ru/museum1/index.html> >). Since the end of the 1980’s, the oral history of Moscow was in close focus of the researchers at the Moscow state historical-archival institute (now the Russian state university for Humanities) (Khubova 1988). Oral memoirs also form the Collection of Oral sources



at the Laboratory of local history (*Laboratoriia istoricheskogo kraevedeniia*) at Barnaul State Pedagogical University. The projects on Oral History of Stavropol were conducted by Elena Strekalova at the Stavropol state University.

War memories have been the focus of the Oral History Center at the European University at St. Petersburg where, during 2001–2003, the project on “The Siege in Life and Memory of Leningrad people” was conducted. Selected interviews collected during the project were published in *Nestor, the Journal of Russian and East European History and Culture* (Voronina 2003). The volume: “The Siege in the Memory of the Leningrad people”, dedicated to the results of the project, is going to be published in the beginning of 2006. The projects of the Petrozavodsk Center for Oral History were focusing on the recollections of the war memories. Beyond Russia, in the former soviet republics, war memories were the subject of projects in Kharkiv (Ukraine) (Grinchenko 2004 a, b) and Minsk (at the former European University for Humanities).

The number of surveys on war memories increased especially towards the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War II Victory Day. In May 2004, the Conference on “World War II in oral evidences” took place at the European University at St. Petersburg. In April 2005, the “Memorial” society organized a conference on “The War. The Other Memory” with the support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. A special issue of the NZ journal (*Neprikosnovennyi Zapas*), one of the most famous Moscow periodicals that publishes papers on various scholarly and public issues, was dedicated to war memories. It was published together with the German Journal *Osteuropa* in Russian and German. It was subsequently re-published as a separate book (NZ 2005, Klüften der Erinnerung 2005, Pamiat o voine 2005). In October 2005, an international symposium on “History and Memory”, which was dedicated to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, took place at Peter and Paul Fortress at St. Petersburg.

Irina Scherbakova (2004) has conducted studies on the oral memoirs of gulag survivors. The interviews of the post-war migrants to the territories of former Finnish Karelia and former German Eastern Prussia were published in different ways by the research teams of the European University (Melnikova 2005a; 2005b; Hakamies 2005; Hakkarainen 2005; Filicheva 2005) and Kalingrad State University (*Vostochnaia Prussija* 2002). Gender aspects of oral histories are discussed in several papers (see Chuikina 1996; Shishkareva 2004, 2005; Mescherkina 2004).

The increase of interest towards oral history and memory studies, which has been evident in recent years, is widely reflected in the translation and publishing activity in Russia. In 2003, the Oral History Center at the European University at St. Petersburg published the *Khrestomatija po ustnoi istorii* [Reader on Oral History] (Loskutova 2003), which included the translations of some key papers in the field, such as articles by Alessandro Portelli, Michael Frish, Jan Vansina, Paul Thompson, Luisa Passerini and others. In the same year, books by Paul Thompson and Patrick Hutton were published in Russian. *Cultural Memory* of Jan Assman was translated in 2004. The volume *Women’s Oral History*, which was mentioned above, included several more

translations of Portelli's works. The abstracts from a famous work by Maurice Halbwachs were published in a special issue of *NZ*, along with Portelli's *The Massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine: History, Myth, Ritual, and Symbol*.

In recent times, Russian scholars have started joining international Oral History networks, developing collaborative projects, participating in international meetings and so on. However, it cannot be said that oral history is, in today's Russia, a visible, more or less bordered and clear field. The interest towards subversive memories and multifaceted histories is apparent in both public and academic areas. The process of methodological borrowings is very strong, and oral history studies seem to be consequently losing its exceptional edges and background, and becoming a viewpoint rather than a discipline or an approach.

## NOTES

1. F. Bartlett's *Remembering* was published in 1932. Maurice Halbwachs' first book, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) did not receive much attention initially, but became famous after it was compiled and translated into English in 1950 as *On Collective Memory*.
2. See Gelis 1925: "How one should write the memoirs?"
3. The project was conducted in the framework of a larger project "Conditions for Constructing a New Russia: Interactions of Tradition and Europeanness in the Development of Twentieth-Century Russia". The project was financed by the Academy of Finland during the years 2000–2003 and the leader of the project is senior research fellow Antti Laine at the Karelian Institute. The writers are ethnologists, folklorists and historians from Finland and Russia and they are all participants of the project.
4. Curiously, oral history studies were not present at the next Congress which was held in St. Petersburg in 2005.

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PROJECT “WOMEN. MEMORY. WAR”.

The Center for Gender Studies, European University for Humanities (Minsk, Belarus).

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