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

*James Mark*

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2010, 312 PAGES.

Academic literature about the collective memory of the Second World War and Communism in Central-Eastern Europe is not thin on the ground. However, it is rare to encounter a monograph whose ambition is to account for the memory cultures of no fewer than seven former Communist countries (Poland, Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), written by an author who possesses the language skills required to undertake original research across the region.

This book by the historian James Mark covers the multifaceted ways the Communist years are remembered in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. The book's general argument is that 1989 was not the unequivocal caesura that is often pictured in the West. On the contrary, the peacefully negotiated revolutions in Eastern Europe (except for Romania) did not provide a clear-cut break with the past, and Communism continued to have a life of its own in the minds of the people.

In chapter one Mark maps out the various interpretations of 1989 across the post-Communist political spectrum. Whilst left-leaning liberals saw the inclusion of Communists (reformed or not) in post-Communist politics as an indicator of a truly democratic transition, the conservative Right was dismayed by the success of the old *nomenklatura* after 1989, proclaiming the revolution 'unfinished'. In chapter two, Mark turns to the History Commission in Romania and the Institutes of National Memory in Poland, main actors in the collective remembrance process in their respective countries. Chapters three and four are devoted to museums, monuments, statue parks, and excavations of mass graves across the region. Together, these four chapters form the first half of the book, in which the typical remains of the various historical cultures are analysed.

A particular dilemma in Poland and the Baltic States is the conflicted collective memory that stems from the existence of two competing narratives about their actions during the Second World War. States were asked to confront their Fascist pasts and their role in the Holocaust, yet accepting their culpability gave greater authority to the Russian narrative of the Red Army as liberator than either the Poles or the Baltic peoples were inclined to accept. The

author provides an original contribution to this well-charted territory in the shape of his interviews with the historians, archivists, prosecutors, activists, archaeologists, and curators who have played (and continue to play) a crucial role in contemporary memory debates. To take one example, the analysis of Romania's History Commission, established to provide a new account of the national past that could buttress democratic development, gains considerably from the interviews with its members. Their honest opinions about the post-Communist historical culture and the workings of the commission are very revealing of the bitter, continuing contest for Romania's collective memory, although sometimes one could wish that Mark had engaged more actively with their narratives rather than simply presenting them. Fortunately, in the other cases the author challenges his interviewees' accounts, and the result is an excellent analysis of the sites of memory where the history of the inter-war period, the Second World War, and the Communist years are communicated to the public. Moreover, the author's deep knowledge of seven distinct countries enables him to highlight the particular within the broader, common context.

The second half of the book is based on interviews with more than hundred people, collected over the past decade: the largest group consists of those born into the middle classes in Hungary in the inter-war period; the other two evenly sized groups of those born in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary who were either Party members or opposed to the regime. In chapters five and six, the most original sections of the book, Mark uses the interviews to analyse the stories that have been silenced, revived, or reformulated since 1989. The author generously shares these life narratives with the reader in lengthy quotes, from which it emerges how complicated it is to force a life lived into predetermined categories such as victim, perpetrator, or bystander. Moreover, the interviews support the argument that the Communist regimes were also 'biocracies' in which 'the individual's chances of succeeding are determined by his or her ability or readiness to construct a politically acceptable public autobiography' (174).

James Mark has produced a well-written, if at times repetitive, account of a large number of countries, and demonstrates how oral history can aid traditional studies of memory sites. His most original and important contribution remains the collection of interviews with professional historians and witnesses of the Communist period. At the same time, this wealth of information also provides the book's weaker moments methodologically speaking, with questions of selection bias and generalizability left begging. The diverse historical trajectories followed by the countries in question forces Mark to provide background information on

‘how it really was’ before turning to ‘how it is remembered’. However, this information is delivered with ease and never outweighs the analysis. Readers unfamiliar with twentieth-century Central and Eastern European history will perhaps find the book difficult at times, but further explanations are always at hand in the notes. Moreover, the book’s substantial bibliography comprises a wealth of recent literature in English, German, and French (besides references in the original Romanian, Hungarian, and Polish) that will serve as excellent starting-point for the student or researcher who wishes to explore the field further.

*Sune Bechmann Pedersen*