Far-Right Europe Online

A Mosaic of the Diversity of Right-Wing Historical Memory

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On the Digital Frontline: Far-Right Memory Work in the Baltic, Central and East European Online Spaces

Andrej Kotljarchuk and Francesco Zavatti (eds.), (Visby: Eddy, 2023) Opuscula Historia Upsalensia 62 , 197 pages.

The volume, a result of the research project "Memory Politics in Far-Right Europe: Celebrating Nazi Collaborationists in post-1989 Belarus, Romania, Flanders and Denmark" takes a broad and eclectic approach to a number of interrelated yet quite different problems relating to historical memory and the instrumentalization and weaponization of the past across a heterogenous geographic area of Europe. The title sets out to engage "Far-Right Memory Work" and a number of online contexts in very different political contexts and under different conditions. The definition of the very term "far right" is elusive and tends to be contested. It is often hard to agree on definitions, not least across disciplines, even more so across time, space and political and social cultures. The editors use a very broad definition: "The far right, as we understand it, is a deliberately generic umbrella term for a multitude of parties, movement, groupuscules, and individuals that endorse positions ranging from, but not limited to, radical conservatism, illiberalism, libertarianism, authoritarianism, and fascism." (p. 11)

Many readers would, no doubt, find a definition that places libertarianism and authoritarianism in the same "far right" basket problematic. What would this mean in practice? Such a wide span, from Ludwig von Mieses and the Austrian school of Economics to Adolf Eichmann, feels less then optimal to engage the wide scope of issues the volume sets out to address. Therefore, "In this anthology, different concepts such as 'populist ultra-nationalism', 'neo-Nazism', 'extreme far right', 'far-right populism', 'radical right' and 'extreme right'" have to get along well together. (p. 12–13).

HOWEVER, AS THIS is a volume in the discipline of history, most readers may be more interested in sources and material rather than theory and taxonomy. A historian is often more interested in empirical analysis. The volume consists of case studies from states as different as Belarus, Ukraine, Romania, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Sweden: from repressive authoritarian states to solid, stable liberal democracies. To compare such divergent political contexts is a daunting task. The phenomena examined within these societies are similarly diverse. In the case of post-socialist states, the focus is on revisionist narratives around local pro-Axis collaborationist and far right groups with totalitarian legacies of anti-Semitism and collaboration in the Holocaust. These groups, in turn, diverge within this post-socialist sub-group, according to different historical – and current – political situations. Lithuania and West Ukraine are the closest phenotypes, and the narratives and strategies of disavowal very similar: a "widened" use of the term genocide equating communism with genocide. These narratives place the Lithuanian and Ukrainian majority populations in the role of genocide victims, equating the perpetrators with ethnic others: for the most part Russians and Jews (and sometimes Poles and Germans). The volume delineates memory laws, memory institutes modelled on or inspired by each other, collaborating in various European networks, through The European Platform of Memory and Conscience, and issuing joint declarations equating communism and Nazism, such as the 2008 Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism. Typically, the governmental organizations have names such as "Genocide and Resistance." They affirm each other's genocide claims and sometimes venerate each other's highly problematic interwar fascist groups. Some passed memory laws that outlaw "disrespect" of the nationalizing state's interwar far right heroes, and their promoters occupy key positions, such as Institutes of National Memory, or key infrastructure for managing memory such as the archives of the former KGB. In Ukraine, activists from façade organizations of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) manage the archives of the former KGB; in Lithuania, the KGB archives building also hosts the revisionist "Museum of Genocide Victims," (since 2018 "Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights"), eagerly depicting Lithuanians as genocide victims, while for many years ignoring the Holocaust. (p. 117–119)

ARE THESE REVISIONIST historical institutes "far right"? The term feels somewhat inadequate, as both are in the hands of anti-communist, yet pro-EU, pro-NATO, Atlanticist political figures; as a rule, politically conservative (and not too keen on woke ideology, intersectionality, and transgender rights). Justina Smalkytė problematized the rehabilitation of radical anti-Semites like Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis (1903–1974) or Jonas Noreika (1910–1947), who partook in the ghettoization or murder of Jews in 1941–1943 (118). Michael Cole examines the parallel phenomenon of the rehabilitation of the Ukrainian ultranationalist Stepan Bandera (1909–1959) or ethnic cleansers such Roman Shukhevych (1907–1950) (173), and how revisionism requires denial of atrocities committed, and the censoring of critical inquiry into the less flattering aspect of their heroes' past. As both Smalkytė and Cole shows, the apologists do not always fit the conventional far right template.

The case of Belarus stands out, though the narrative strategies of disavowal of the quasi-underground nationalist opposition closely resemble those of its neighbors: Andrej Kotljarchuk surveys a rather simplistic binary of heroes and villains, follow-

ing the Soviet template, but with the roles revised, and new heroes being sought – the 30th Waffen-SS and other Axis-affiliated authoritarian nationalists – replacing that of the Brezhnev-era narrative of the heroism of the Soviet family of nations in the Great Patriotic War. This narrative offers little room for introspection and reflection on local agency in mass atrocities.

The Romanian case is a borderline example. Francesco Zavatti shows how the cult of the Romanian Legionnaires has aspects of the above-mentioned revisionist cases. At the same time, revisionism also fuels groups that endorse neo-Legionnaire positions, such as those of Calin Georgescu, who received the most votes in the first round of the 2024 presidential elections.

TWO CHAPTERS STAND out: Madeleine Hurd and Stephen Werther's chapter on the Nordic Resistance Movement, NMR, and Ilana Hurtikainen's chapter on the Czech Workers' Party for Social Justice, DSSS. These chapters describe two utterly radical fringe parties, with small, yet dedicated, vanguards of committed ideological combatants. DSSS obtained 10,402 votes, and NMR 2,106 votes, respectively, at their peak in the 2010s. The NMR is a violent, outright neo-Nazi fringe group of about 200 members committed to violence, whereas DSSS have assimilated aspects of National Socialist ideology. Here we are dealing with right-wing extremism in its most radical form. Vanessa Tautter's chapter on the memory culture of the Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ, which she describes as "populist right" or "far-right populist"(147) seem to fall into yet another category. Tautter analyzes online reactions to FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache's declaration on the 80th anniversary of the 1938 Anschluss, in particular his statement "There cannot and must not be any understanding, no relativizing words and certainly no justification for the crimes of the Nazis," which were not universally well received in social media. (148) Tautter notes how "genuinely critical engagement with the violent history of the Nazi past [...]can only ever be unsettling and discomforting for the descendants of those involved," (p. 163) and addresses the incomplete reckoning and the discomfort among sections of Strache's and the FPÖ's followers when dealing with Austrian agency in Nazi atrocities.

The volume thus seeks to accommodate a spectrum of quite diverse expressions on political and historical matters, from very different social groups and online actors: from violent Swedish neo-Nazis, conservative nationalist eastern European Holocaust negationists, and Austrian ambiguity and disavowal among sympathizers of its populist right. If some questions remain as to how and why these particular cases were made, a volume of this kind does not *have* to be read back-to-back. The individual chapters stand well on their own. Even if the common thread is sometimes thin, Kotljarchuk and Zavatti offer a welcome and timely mosaic of the diversity of right-wing historical memory. The authors are far from alone in wrestling with a coherent framework and nomenclature for this phenomenon. The ambitious volume sheds light on some understudied phenomena (such as Lithuanian and Belarusian far-right memory politics), offering many valuable observations and much food for thought; the authors deserve credit not only for the ambitious transnational, interdisciplinary approach, but also for offering a platform for new, up-and-coming scholars across Europe east and west.

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Francesco Zavatti in his chapter on the case of Romania shows how revisionism fuels groups that endorse neo-Legionnaire positions, such as those of Calin Georgescu. Screen shot from Facebook.