

## An Archipelago of Post-communist Memory

Review of: Daniela Koleva, *Memory Archipelago of the Communist past: Public Narratives and Personal Recollections* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 296 pp. EUR 108.99 ISBN: 978-3-031-04657-5.

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The memory of the communist past is a leading topic in scholarship focusing on the cultural and socio-political legacies of the twentieth century socialist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe. Since the turn of the century, post-communist memory has attracted interdisciplinary attention across a variety of academic fields, from cultural history to sociology, anthropology, and cultural and literary studies<sup>1</sup>, asserting itself as a multifaceted subject that offers diverse entry points for analysing the communist past's afterlife in society, culture, and politics. While the trauma of the communist states' totalitarian repressions has entered the European framework of remembrance, nostalgia for communism has remained its strong affective counterpart, refracted through consumer culture, political rhetoric, and personal recollections, creating two unreconcilable versions of the past that co-inhabit post-communist societies. But how have these seemingly binary poles of remembrance stabilized in post-communist societies and are they as disconnected and arbitrary as they seem? What is the role of political discourse, transitional justice measures, and cultural objects in mediating these affective readings of the past? And do these grand narratives of nostalgia and trauma leave any space for engagement with

- 1 See, for example, Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (New York: Viking, 2001); Deema Kaneff, *Who Owns the Past? The Politics of Time in a 'Model' Bulgarian Village* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); Gerald W. Creed, *Domesticating Revolution: From Socialist Reform to Ambivalent Transition in a Bulgarian Village* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, Julie Fedor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, ed. by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire's Legacies*, ed. by Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos and Ksenia Robbe, (New York: Routledge, 2020); *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe*, ed. by Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou and Stefan Troebst (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014); *20 Years after the Collapse of Communism: Expectations, achievements and disillusion of 1989*, ed. by Nicolas Hayoz, Leszek Jesien, Daniela Koleva (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

*Journal of Perpetrator Research* 5.1(2023), 119–127  
doi: 10.21039/jpr.5.1.129 © 2023 by the Author



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more complex questions of responsibility, complicity, and implication in post-communist memory? The latest work by Bulgarian cultural historian and memory scholar Daniela Koleva, *Memory Archipelago of the Communist Past: Public Narratives and Personal Recollections* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) responds to the increasing need for a better understanding of post-communist societies and attitudes, by enquiring into the heterogeneity of their mnemonic landscapes. Thinking through the communist past as a memory archipelago, the book departs from the assertion that socialism is a common site of memory but not a site of common memory (p. 6). Focusing on the context of Bulgaria, Koleva utilizes the figure of the archipelago to conceptualize the glaring lack of dialogic relation between different Bulgarian post-communist memory cultures. Utilizing a comparative methodology and focusing on the narrative aspects of memory, her book uncovers the role of political, legal, cultural, and communicative frameworks in creating the mnemonic paradigms of trauma and nostalgia in post-communist societies. The book allows readers to see how these very narratives can sometimes side-line questions of bystanding and complicity in post-communist memory, specifically in the context of Bulgaria.

*Memory Archipelago* traces memory-building in Bulgaria in relation to other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries' trajectories of post-socialist development and places them in a larger framework of European memory and identity. It thus pays significant attention to Europe's institutional and symbolic presence as an important agent in the creation of official and unofficial mnemonic narratives about communism in Eastern Europe. For the field of Perpetrator Studies, the book presents a valuable resource as it provides a substantial comparative account of the processes of transitional justice in CEE countries (Chapter 3) and an in-depth analysis of the role Holocaust memory has played in the formation of their post-communist mnemonic cultures (Chapter 2 and 4). It illustrates how legal, cultural, and commemorative vocabulary and imagery that were originally developed in the context of the Holocaust were adapted to the post-communist context, while tracing the controversies and problematics that often result from such attempts. Chapters 2, 4 and 5 also offer particularly interesting insights into how memories of perpetratorship and questions of complicity and responsibility are reframed and assimilated into a discourse of victimhood in the arenas of both official and unofficial post-communist memory.

The book is composed of an Introduction, followed by two parts, corresponding to the author's macro and micro-level analysis of official and unofficial memory. Departing from the clash of traumatic and nostalgic 'archipelago islands' in post-socialist Bulgaria, the Introduction lays the theoretical groundwork for the study. The main conceptual framework draws on the field of Memory Studies, which provides the tools to explore correlations between cultural and communicative forms of memory (p. 4). The attention to narratives as structuring principles of both official and unofficial memory, links the two parts of the book, evidencing the complex interplay between them.

Part I 'Politics of Memory and Memory Cultures' contains three chapters which examine the macro-level construction of an 'official' mnemonic narrative of the socialist past across different institutional frameworks. Chapter 2, the first chapter of Part I, traces CEE countries' efforts to position the communist past within the context of already existing European memory cultures, with specific attention to the central place of the Holocaust in European memory and identity. Substantiated by documentation from European Parliament assemblies, resolutions and laws, Koleva provides a detailed account of the efforts of CEE countries to braid the memory of socialism within the narrative of Europe utilizing the vocabulary of human rights that developed in the context of Holocaust memory. Her analysis shows how CEE countries were able to utilize in particular the discourse on trauma and victimhood in their symbolic 'return' to Europe. She then makes a compelling case for looking at the socialist past's traumatic interpretation at a European level within a context of a politics of recognition, as geared towards the formation of a renewed, European identity.

Chapter 3 traces the trajectories of transitional justice across CEE countries and the national frameworks of memory created through them, framing legislative justice as an instrument of memory. Koleva places the focus on Bulgaria, evaluating the specificities of the Bulgarian case within the larger post-socialist geo-political context. The chapter provides a sustained analysis of the legal trajectories adopted by CEE countries, from restorative justice for the victims, to the application of lustration or 'de-communization' measures (administrative measures taken to remove remainders of the old regime and foster conditions for democracy at an institutional level), and the development of the post-socialist mnemopolitical dogma of a 'politics of truth'. Koleva's argument for looking at legislative measures as memory-making instruments is particularly compelling in her interpretation of the

property restitution legislation in Bulgaria as a symbolic restoration of intergenerational linkages interrupted by the nationalization of property imposed by the regime (p. 69). The chapter also pays significant attention to the legal mechanisms adopted for establishing perpetrator accountability. While the judicial proceedings against perpetrators were not always successful as justice mechanisms, the author emphasises their symbolic power as 'rituals of truth' (p. 77) which shaped the collective memory of the regime in the transitional period. A case in point are the failed trials against the former commandants of the notorious forced-labour camp in Belene, Northern Bulgaria, which nevertheless facilitated the camp's entrance into the national mnemonic discourse, discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 moves on from the legal framework to the arena of cultural memory, discussing the role of post-communist memory institutions in forging an 'official' memory about the past. It traces two kinds of institutions of memory – temporary historians' commissions and institutes of memory, set up across post-socialist countries as a counterpart to the truth and reconciliation commissions operating in post-conflict situations such as post-apartheid South Africa. While the historians' commissions were temporary forums tasked with forging a new historical narrative in the transition, the institutes of memory are state-sponsored archival and research institutions, preoccupied with the documentary inheritance of the former regimes (e.g., Lithuania's Center for the Documentation of the Consequences of Totalitarianism and The Polish Institute for National Remembrance). The author illustrates how the institutes of memory contribute to an official mnemonic discourse focused on injustices, emphasising national victimhood and overlooking everyday life under the socialist regime and forms of participation in the state's structural repressions (pp. 100-101). Foregrounding the absence of the everyday in the post-socialist 'official' mnemonic register, Koleva's analysis also facilitates our understanding of the reasons a discourse on complicity has been largely absent in the post-communist mnemonic context. The chapter goes on to provide an overview of the trends and challenges in the memorialization and musealization of the socialist past, noting the problems CEE countries faced in adapting Holocaust memorialization templates focused on victimhood to their contexts. The particularities of the post-socialist case with its unstable definitions of victims and perpetrators stand out as requiring new templates to narrate its complexity in a nuanced and ethical manner. While Koleva admits that the chapter only provides a

broad overview of the commemorative and museum narrativization of the communist past across the CEE countries, it succeeds in illustrating the fragmentedness of post-communist memory and leads us to consider the implications of such distinct memory cultures that lack dialogic connections. This lays the groundwork for Part II of the book, where the author zooms in on vernacular and local mnemonic narratives.

Part II "Memory Narratives and Mnemonic Communities" is composed of two chapters and the book's Conclusion. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the 'unofficial' or 'vernacular' memory of socialism in Bulgaria utilizing a unique oral history archive built through the projects of the independent Bulgarian Institute for the Study of the Recent Past (ISRP) and the Department of History and Theory of Culture at Sofia University, with which Koleva is affiliated. The author proceeds to examine the affective communities built around traumatic and nostalgic interpretations of the past, asking how these are constructed and sustained in the collective imagination, what underlying topoi, plots and tropes are formed and negotiated at the intersection of social and cultural dimensions of memory. Koleva's inquiry throughout these chapters builds on her previous work on traumatic and nostalgic sites of post-socialist memory in Bulgaria, particularly on the vernacular memory in Belene<sup>2</sup> and first-generation socialists' nostalgia<sup>3</sup>. Her approach to analysing mnemonic cultures as formed across spatial (the Belene community) and temporal (first-generation nostalgia) parameters, as well as her attention to the underlying tropes in oral narrations, will thus be familiar to those who know her earlier work. Her thinking on these phenomena in *Memory Archipelago*, however, acquires a new dimension given the attention to their functioning in a larger transnational, and multi-scalar context of post-socialist memory-making. The book thus compellingly illustrates how affective communities draw on multiple templates and societal arenas of remembrance to create their mnemonic narratives.

Chapter 5 examines the traumatic narrative of communism in Bulgaria by zooming in on one of the most notorious *lieux de mémoire* of the regime's repressions, the Belene forced-labour camp. Set up on the

2 Daniela Koleva, 'Belene: remembering the labour camp and the history of memory', *Social History*, 37:1 (2012), 1-18; Daniela Koleva, Белене – Място на Памет? Антропологична Анкета [Belene – a Place of Memory? Anthropological Questionnaire] (Sofia: Siela, 2010).

3 Daniela Koleva, 'Hope for the Past? Postsocialist Nostalgia 20 Years Later' in *20 Years after the Collapse of Communism: Expectations, achievements and disillusion of 1989*, ed. by Nicolas Hayoz, Leszek Jesien, Daniela Koleva (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 417-435.

island of Persin – part of the Belene Archipelago in the Danube River, next to the town of Belene, the camp was the largest and longest running of dozens of similar repressive institutions that operated across communist Bulgaria. After 1990, the Belene camp became the subject of numerous cultural productions focused on the recent past, including documentaries, memoirs and testimonies by survivors and their families, which portray the inhumane conditions, violence and abuse the internees suffered, testifying to the criminal nature of the camp, and by extension, of the communist regime itself. Koleva shows how the national memory of the camp established with the help of these cultural representations is one of trauma and suffering. Interestingly, what stands at the core of her analysis is the dynamic between this national memory and the local memory in the town of Belene. A large part of the Belene community had been employed by the camp, the prison, or the agricultural land that belonged to it throughout the years as guards, administrative and operational staff, sharing in the knowledge about the horrors that transpired there. Analysing a range of biographical interviews with local Beleners, Koleva uncovers how interviewees draw on diverse templates in their narrations to position their community in relation to the camp – from internalized rhetoric of the regime's classification of internees as criminals to the post-1990 public discourse on victimhood and trauma (p. 181). While they borrow from the public traumatic narrative to recognize the internees' unjust suffering, Beleners simultaneously avoid the uncomfortable question of their own community's responsibility and complicity in this suffering. This chapter is particularly useful for further scholarly inquiries into how memories of complicity are repressed in the post-socialist context - it showcases the interaction between internalized norms, public mnemonic templates, biographical knowledge, and communal intimacy in externalizing guilt and upholding a victimhood-focused narrative in post-socialist Bulgaria. The chapter also pays attention to the important role of religious culture in the local community, as well as the influence of the European mnemonic context on the formation of local memory in the Belene community. Koleva thus uncovers a multiplicity of interactions in the public space that dynamically shape and reshape Belene's memory in the present.

Chapter 6 dives into another complex phenomenon associated with the CEE mnemonic context – post-socialist nostalgia. Koleva approaches nostalgia as a biographical phenomenon encountered in oral narrations of individuals born in Bulgaria between 1920 and 1940. By

examining the underlying topoi and plots of nostalgic narrations by first-generation socialists, her analysis offers insights into nostalgia's relation to both the post-socialist present and the socialist past. By juxtaposing an idealized past with an inhospitable present, nostalgic narrators voice a dissatisfaction with the current historical moment, which they perceive as one of societal collapse and rupture of communal intimacy (p. 241). In the context of their narrations, however, they also reveal how the socialist system was adapted for communal or personal benefit over time. Foregrounding the generational perspective in these narrations, Koleva looks at nostalgia as a tool for building generational intimacy by fabricating a world in the past around which a community can be forged. Her analysis thus evaluates nostalgia as both a democratic relationship to the past, renegotiated from below, as well as potentially covering up complicity and hindering the development of a critical historical consciousness (p. 265). The chapter traces how nostalgic narrations reveal the 'hollowing out' of the communist postulates before the fall of the regime by replacing them with more informal articulations of ideals of equality and social justice (p. 246). In this context, it also would have been interesting to see some more reflection on these 'selective' workings of official socialist discourse. Given the emphasis on the internalized aspects of socialist rhetoric in the narratives of Beleners shown in the previous chapter, it raises a question regarding the selective application of official rhetoric in mnemonic recollections about socialism depending on the aim of the narration in the post-socialist context. Given Koleva's previous work with Aleksander Kiossev on how the automatized nature of socialist rhetoric relates to autobiographical narration following the regime's collapse<sup>4</sup>, some more in-depth reflection on discourse and narrative agency between internalized state rhetoric and post-1990 public discourse, would have enriched the discussion and would have enabled her to draw more connections between the last two chapters. These points also hold potential for further scholarly inquiry into the topic of complicity in post-socialist memory.

The book's Conclusion evaluates the archipelagic state of post-socialist memory cultures in Bulgaria in relation to future possibilities for memory-making. Koleva frames the plurality of affective interpretations of the past as signifying ongoing memory work that precludes

4 Aleksander Kiossev and Daniela Koleva, *Трудният разказ. Модели на автобиографично разказване за социализма между устното и писменото* [The Difficult Narrative. Models of Autobiographical Narration about Socialism between Oral and Written] (Sofia: Siela, 2017).

the discursive 'closure' of the subject and indicates hope for a dialogic relation between different cultures of memory in the post-communist context. While the author employs the figure of the archipelago mainly to highlight the separation and fragmentation of memory, it could also be thought of as a figure of relation and relationality, as theorized, for example, by Édouard Glissant.<sup>5</sup> This approach would be borne out by Koleva's emphasis on hope and would consider the post-communist past as a point of mnemonic connection among different post-communist societies, inviting further comparative work.

*Memory Archipelago* carefully guides the reader through the complexity of the post-socialist mnemonic terrain, offering a clear, well-structured, and insightful analysis of the way post-socialist memory-making works across multiple entangled social, cultural, and political levels. It furthers our understanding of the role that narratives of trauma and nostalgia play in smoothing over more uncomfortable questions of complicity and responsibility in post-communist Bulgaria. Koleva's book is an essential source for scholars interested in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe.

5 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1990).

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