



## Book Review

Zavadski, Andrei, Dubina, Vera, eds., *Vse v proshlom: teoriya i praktika publichnoi istorii* [All Things Past: Theory and Practice of Public History]. Novoe izdatelstvo: Moscow, 2021.

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At present, the social reference to the past is characterized by opposing tendencies: on the one hand, history (as a narrative) has become enormously important for assuring collective identity; on the other hand, trust in history (as a science) is almost at zero. In the situation where a head of state legitimizes his war against the neighboring state with “history” and “historical truth,” the view of historians as “servants of the state” is reinforced. In today’s authoritarian, if not already totalitarian, Russian state, speaking about history has become an extremely dangerous task: The politics of history is at its peak, punishing alternative discourses with a hitherto unseen severity. The edited volume reviewed here captures the state of memory culture in Russia up to the day of the attack on Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, and it will likely serve as a repository of sources and case studies for future researchers. Therein lies its special value, which the editors Andrei Zavadski (Berlin) and Vera Dubina (Moscow, Bremen) did not even envisage in this form when they planned this handbook on public history.

This is also the first goal and task of the volume: to break down the globally flourishing scientific branch of Public History for Russian historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and others and to stimulate its further research. It is the first publication on public history in Russian. While research and publications on the field of historical politics/politics of memory were mainly carried out by the St. Petersburg European University (EU SPb), the social desires for memory culture as well as the practices of memory “from below” remained the topic of the Moscow ‘Shaninka,’ i.e. the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. The master’s program in Public History, founded here in 2012, enjoyed a great reputation and popularity. Thus, most of the authors of the anthology are its graduates, among them the co-editor Andrei Zavadski, who subsequently completed his PhD in Germany and is now a research associate at the Institute of Art and Material Culture at TU Dortmund University.

Starting from the basis of public history, that the past is brought closer to the present through certain practices and at the same time the distance to it is critically reflected, the

handbook deals with Russian memory culture beyond the usual politics of history. This is a great achievement of the anthology, since Western research on memory culture in Russia is nearly exclusively concerned with Putin’s politics of history.<sup>1</sup>

The essays collected here discuss diverse formats of dealing with the past, primarily in Russia, but not exclusively so. They also include projects in Ukraine, Belarus, Germany, and the Central Asian republics. The authors deal with media such as theater, autobiography and historical novel, graphic novel, video games, museums, land and urban studies, digital humanities, music, art, and photography. Each contribution is divided into thematic introduction, theory, examples, or practices that test empiricism against public history methods. All authors have succeeded in demonstrating the analytical gains of public history on their material, and thus a very dense, differentiated, and multi-layered picture of memory culture emerges in the anthology, in which many actors (not only the state!) with different goals and ideas are involved. Memorial cemeteries (among others, to the victims of Stalinism such as Kovalevski Les or Sandormoch) would certainly be interesting as formats of public history, since here, in a peculiar way, the desire for traditional mourning for the dead comes together with a denominationally guided culture of remembrance oriented towards group identity formation.

As such a body of fieldwork empiricism, this anthology will be indispensable to future memory researchers. Nolens volens (like it or not), the last contribution in the anthology by the Russian American cultural scientist and anthropologist Serguei Oushakine also takes on a special poignancy today. His essay “Colonial Omelet and its Consequences. On the Public Histories of the Post-Colonies of Socialism” takes a critical approach to the application of post-colonial theories to the situation in post-Soviet republics. Oushakine draws attention to the aporia in the successor states of the Soviet Union: in this post-colonial paradigm, states then rewrite their history quasi-imperially after all. Thus, the ‘Thousand-Year Empires’ stand as the essentialist root of nations at the center of liberation from ‘foreign’ Soviet rule. The insistence on the role of the victim of Russian/Soviet colonization expanded or reoriented (Western) post-colonial theory: it is not the multiple moderns that would be at the center of thinking here, but the nation and its memory, according to

<sup>1</sup> Most recently: Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler, eds., *The Future of the Soviet Past. The Politics of History in Putin’s Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

Oushakine. If one perceives the current discussion in the field of East European history about Ukraine being Soviet as a colonial situation, the author in a sense puts his finger in the wound here.

This book, as a result of long reflection and interdisciplinary exchange, will certainly continue to have an impact on research in public history. The publication certainly stimulates thinking, and in any case also further research. But will this research be feasible?

At the moment, melancholy dominates: the war has fundamentally changed the subject of memory studies for the worse. The mentioned universities Shaninka and the EU SPb were repressed. The rector of the Moscow University was dismissed in 2022, the St. Petersburg one is currently

under investigation by the prosecutor's office. Many Russian and Belarusian authors of the anthology went into exile, including the (co-)editor Vera Dubina, who now lives in Bremen. Independent research of the culture of memory will continue to leave Russia, just as the basic speaking about it in public will dwindle. The liquidation of *Memorial* in the winter of 2021/22, new criminal laws against historical interpretations, bans on public actions on memorial days, and demonstrative punishments against students of history are intended to spread fear and deprive Russian society of any desire to engage even remotely with history. Historian Andrei Zorin's wish in the epilogue for a new situation – may public history evolve from a field of struggle to a forum for dialogue – has disappeared behind the horizon in 2023.