

Local and difficult: Remembering and Forgetting Difficult Times in Local Contexts

Local and difficult are two adjectives that characterize the key focus of research presented in this special issue. The authors look back at past uncertain times, disturbances, crises or conflicts and their continued current influence or resonance with some of the pressing questions of today. So-called difficult histories are explored in different contexts using a variety of approaches without necessarily making “the difficult” the central focus. Rather, it is the ways in which individuals, groups and towns have adapted to, interpreted, rationalized and justified their own or others’ actions and attitudes in relation to the difficult history/ies in question.

The interpretation of the past is, of course, a contextual act that is always influenced by many factors. Not everyone impacted by a historical event has a say in its interpretation and not all interpretations are equal – they are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated by different social groups. The outcomes are frequently presented in terms of winners and losers, victims and aggressors, terms that make narratives about the past clear and easy to work with. However, as Rothberg argues in his highly influential *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, the struggle for collective articulation and recognition should not be understood as involving winners and losers as it is “fundamentally unstable and subject to ongoing reversal [...]: today’s ‘losers’ may turn out to be tomorrow’s ‘winners’” (2009: 6). Many historians, social scientists, humanities scholars and others have been uncovering and complicating simplistic accounts of history which continue to be used to legitimize various political decisions.

The remembering of the past – not only in the form of officially sanctioned commemoration – is the outcome of negotiations or outright struggles for recognition. Some voices are suppressed or completely ignored and acts of counter-commemoration do not necessarily gain mainstream attention or are purposely marginalized. Some legitimate demands for recognition are seen as a threat to long-lasting deeply embedded narratives of the national past and sometimes to national values themselves (including tolerance and freedom). Those following recent developments around monuments to the Confederacy in the United States or to slave owners and colonialists in the United Kingdom are well aware of the societal reactions when existing historical accounts are being challenged. As Kaitlin Murphy argues, “at the root of these debates is a fundamental inquiry not just about what monuments *are* but, more importantly, what monuments are intended to *do* for and within a body politic” (2021: 1144, original emphasis).

The concept of difficult history has recently become increasingly common in historiography, (historical) sociology and pedagogy. Difficult histories are key to a nation's history and they tend to question established versions of the past. Violence – frequently collective or state sanctioned – tends to be part of these histories and they often reiterate problems that face us in the present (see e.g. Gross and Terra 2018). Writing in the context of the United States and the teaching of difficult histories, Gross and Terra argue that “to integrate these periods or events into an existing historical understanding may require people to change their assumptions or beliefs. Such a process comes at a cost, either individually, in adjusting our relationship to the nation and state, or collectively, in the national story we tell.” (Ibid: 54) This is echoed in the articles presented in this special issue.

This special issue focuses on cases from East Central Europe which has had its difficult histories and controversies around challenges to officially sanctioned and preferred interpretations of the past. The ways in which Hungarian and Polish political elites in particular re-write their countries' role in the Second World War and the Holocaust – and the reactions to this – have been much discussed in scholarly literature as well as in mainstream media (see e.g. Rév 2018; Downing – Carter 2022; Hackmann 2018; Ray – Kapralski 2019). The concept of difficult history has been explored in relation to post-WW2 studies, many of which – not surprisingly – focus on Germany (see e.g. Gallinat 2006; Macdonald 2008; Wittlinger – Boothroyd 2010). It is, however, not only WW2 and its aftermath that involves difficult histories in East Central Europe. We suggest that going back to the First World War and the development of nation states as well as exploring the emergence of communist regimes, their fall and the subsequent transition to democracy within the context of difficult histories is highly desirable in relation to these countries.

As already suggested, scholarship on this region has paid extensive attention to the legacy of communism which has been studied in heritage and memory studies as well as more broadly in humanities and social sciences (see e.g. Ciobanu 2021; Nalepa 2010; Watson 2018; Řehořová 2021). However, this special issue is not focused on post-communist legacies although these reverberate throughout the issue. It should, however, be noted that some recent developments in the scholarship on post-communist legacies are close to our own approach. In their special issue for *Memory Studies* (2022), Margaret Tali and Ieva Astahovska focus on suppressed memories and the unsilencing of difficult histories in Eastern Europe within a trans-local and trans-national framework. We have long been concerned with local settings (see e.g. Metyková 2014; Vacková – Waschková Císařová 2023; Vacková et al. 2017; Vacková – Strobach – Chodějovská 2023) and

one particular setting that has perhaps understandably been the locus of difficult past events – the borderlands.

Why our insistence on the local? The local context is close to individuals' everyday lived experiences, it is more immediate and, in some ways, more impactful than the national framework partly due to devolved political and economic powers. Municipalities, local councils and authorities have scope to develop their own policies and actions also in relation to commemoration and heritage that can offer alternatives to the national narrative of the past (see e.g. Ochman 2009) or a more nuanced approach to national policies related to difficult histories (see e.g. Aguilar 2017). This, however, does not mean that local contexts are idyllic or equitable by their nature. On the contrary, competing interests and power struggles play out very clearly and these also apply to representation and commemoration. It is without a doubt that in some cases local commemoration is driven by policies with economic goals that often focus on attracting tourism and that have only a tangible link to a past event (see e.g. Carbonell 2014).

Local policies and actions are not inclusive by nature and local acts of remembering and the establishment/removal of memorials are negotiated and re-negotiated and although the groups involved can be ethnically diverse, this is not always the case as we show in this special issue. Local collective remembering – much akin to the national – is an identity project that is impatient with ambiguity and relies on implicit theories, schemas, and scripts that simplify the past and ignore substantiated findings that do not fit the established narrative, it is conservative and resistant to change (Wertsch – Roediger 2008). Yet, the local – as illustrated in this special issue – can also provide a “safe” identity/identification or indeed a way of escaping assumed or imposed identities that would inconvenience, disadvantage, or even endanger the individual. This is particularly pertinent in relation to difficult histories and post-conflict realities that are sometimes complicated by a refusal to accept a version of the past based on reconciliation (see e.g. Robinson 2022).

From the perspective of remembering, the local is also very interesting as a site of civic engagement and activism. A number of studies explore local activism related to remembering and they often elucidate the political and legal contexts and explore strategies and tactics used by activists (see e.g. Hite 2021). Some scholars focus on “bottom-up” material commemoration, with Tracy Adams examining how vernacular de-commemoration is performed. She argues that

re-memorialization is always preceded by de-commemoration, and, in turn, de-commemoration is not always the final word in the con-

stant negotiation about the meaning of the past in the present. [...] [P]ractices of de-commemoration and re-memorialization can be either official or vernacular; at times, a mix of both. The distinction between top-down and bottom-up modes of operation shape the meaning of the practice, at times also affecting its public reception and resonance. (Adams 2023: 2)

Patricia Lundy (2024) also focuses on “bottom-up” commemoration and poses the question whether heritage can be activism in relation to the Justice for Magdalene Research’s virtual memorial museum. She proposes the concept of “activist heritage” which in the absence of state or national recognition provides a corrective to the authorized heritage discourse.

The local, of course, does not exist in isolation and is embedded in various networks at the national level and beyond, some of these connect directly to difficult histories, for example, to colonialism and wars (see e.g. Barrett 2007; Johnson 2018; Slyomovics 2020). In some cases, local undertakings that relate to remembering are funded and regulated by agencies (sometimes run by a state or affiliated with a state) that go beyond the national borders. Cultural policies are linked to identity-based projects and can play a role in promoting a preferred narrative of the past or indeed in complicating existing narratives, an issue that is particularly pertinent in cross-border settings. In the East Central European region that this special issue focuses on, one such example are the cultural policies of Hungary developed in relation to its kin-minorities and diaspora communities as these have caused disquiet in the countries where these minorities and diaspora communities live (for a broader discussion on kin-state politics and transnational engagement see e.g. Csergo 2005 and Kovács 2020). When a foundation close to The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s government started buying up Slovak architectural heritage – in some cases with protected status – it became a major news story and a subject of diplomatic exchanges between the governments.

Some of the contributions to the special issue focus on borderlands and their difficult histories. Much of East Central Europe experienced the creation of nation states and new borders in the aftermath of WW1, further shifts followed after WW2 and more recent history also involved changes to nation states and their borders, including the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Some of the contributions refer to traumatic experiences that accompany the histories of the borderlands, however, borderlands and the recognition of their often-difficult pasts vary widely and involve different actors. Among the most important ones are so-called kin-states, i.e. states that pursue policies aimed at members of co-ethnic groups living abroad, often in a neighbouring country. Csergo argues that

the emergence of kin-state policies, and the political importance of such policies also varies across the continent. A state such as the Czech Republic, for instance (which has no significant external minorities or internal national minorities left), has neither incentives to act as a kin-state itself nor reasons to fear involvement by another kin-state in its domestic affairs. [...] In Central and Eastern Europe, a series of more recent dramatic shifts in political boundaries have engendered a “richer” terrain for the emergence of kin-state activism. (Csergo 2005)

As already mentioned, kin-state policies have an identity dimension that is linked to preferred narratives of the past. Although Hungary was mentioned above, it is not the only actor in the region with active kin-state policies, Poland (see e.g. Udrea, Smith and Cordell 2021), Austria and Slovakia are among them too.

Border studies has established itself as a field of scholarly enquiry and although it has paid some attention to the history of borders, it is only recently that temporality has been used more analytically and more extensively in this field. In her work on memory and everyday borderwork in the Russian-Estonian borderland Alena Pfoser argues that

recent scholarship in border studies have emphasised that bordering functions, including the policing of borders, are increasingly handed over to citizens. More generally the making of borders can be seen as partly dependent on everyday practices which play an important part in legitimising borders and making them stick [...] [A]n examination of memory in everyday borderwork is therefore an important area in the study of border temporalities: it allows not only to achieve a fuller understanding of the forces that constitute and contest borders but also helps to account for the alignments and discrepancies of border temporalities that are usually being overlooked in existing conceptualisations of border temporalities. (Pfoser 2022: 568)

Heritage in/and borderlands has its own complexities as it represents the institutionalized memory of the nation. As mentioned above, borderlands often include groups that do not form part of the national majority and that struggle with or are excluded from the preferred national narrative of the past. As Dorte Jagetic Andersen and Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola argue in their article on heritage as bordering:

Heritage making may thus be understood to aim at creating a sense of ontological security among certain groups but the potential clash between competing versions of heritage making inevitably works towards ontological insecurity. Hence, as would be the case in most bordering processes, there is an ontological politics at play [...] the heritage and commemorative practices are viewed as an ongoing symbolic struggle between different conceptions of the nation, that is, between ethnic, civic and cosmopolitan nationalism. (Andersen – Prokkola 2001: 408)

The articles in the special issue bring together expertise from a variety of fields in humanities and social sciences, with the aim of addressing some of the above outlined broader concepts and themes. We believe that in order to explore the complexities of remembering – and indeed of forgetting – difficult pasts in small localities, a variety of disciplinary, theoretical as well as methodological approaches is highly desirable. This variety, however, does not mean that there are no shared themes and commonalities in the articles, we turn to these below.

Shared themes and commonalities

All the contributions work with a conceptualization of collective memory and the role of language/s in remembering. Although there is no denying the importance of immaterial social life, material objects, resources, facilities all have a place in understanding remembering and memorialization. The material nature of remembering is not central to all articles in this issue but the ones that deal with it discuss small objects as well as architectural heritage. In their introduction to the special issue of *Memory Studies* entitled *Memory, Materiality, Sensuality* Lindsey Freeman, Benjamin Nienass and Rachel Daniell succinctly summarize the importance of the material in remembering:

*In order to think through our pasts, as they are entangled with our presents, we must examine the intersections of sensation, experience, and meaning that arise through our interactions with material forms. To do so, we sift through the capharnaum of the everyday and the extraordinary, the run-of-the-mill and the ruinous, through all kinds of **things**: a panoramic postcard, an irradiated souvenir dime, chunks of concrete with graffiti tattoos, war-time helicopter landing mats, the etched letters on a memorial marker, a bloody yellow shoe left after disaster, and the smooth touch of leather. (Freeman – Nienass – Daniell 2016: 4, original emphasis)*

We consider the liminal nature of the topics covered in the issue important and some of the methodological choices deserve particular attention.

Collective memory and language

The articles in this issue engage with memory, collective memory and, by extension, memory studies. Memory studies can be described as a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach to rethinking history and our capacity to work with and re/construct it. As a field, it draws upon and is closely linked to anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, historiography and other related humanities and social sciences. It is important to reiterate that often, or perhaps always, memory involves the describing and understanding of the current state of things and of negotiating currently existing social positions and inequalities. The past influences the ways in which we define social groups, individuals, nations or, for example, places such as cities or states, and how they exist now. At the heart of the discussion Aleida Assmann (2008) has with Susan Sontag's (2003) approach is the relationship between ideology and collective memory. The past and its imprint in collective memory are the basis for the construction of ideology. And vice versa: ideologies shape the way in which the past appears to us. We do not have the space here to engage in depth with Assman's arguments but it is worth emphasizing some key observations:

Though grounded on external symbols, a collective memory can be re-embodied and transmitted from one generation to another. The cultural memory of a society is based on institutions such as libraries, museums, archives, monuments, institutions of education and the arts as well as ceremonies and commemorative dates and practices. While social forms of memory are short-lived because they depend on embodied and interactive communication, political and cultural formats of memory are designed for a long-term use to be transmitted across generation. (Assmann 2008: 56)

Language is a key tool for the transmission of memories from generation to generation, from one person to another. It is with and in language that we describe and thus re/construct the world around us. In their article on Partizánske-Baťovany (and Zlín-Gottwaldov), Nina Bartošová and Barbora Vacková use the naming of the town/s as a way of rethinking the meanings the inhabitants attached to them. Giving a name to a place or a person or an animal is a process of organising what is outside the system into a systemic order to make it understandable. It is also a purposeful

act full of symbolic significance that refers to the past as well as imagines future prospects. The name that the city built in the 1930s and 1940s was given could have been changed after the demise of the communist regime that did not allow collective decision making around such issues, yet, the inhabitants stuck with it and the link to the past continues to be full of meaning, albeit, as the authors, suggest the meaning-making is an ongoing process, most tangibly driven by a bottom-up local initiative.

The importance of naming or labelling is also highlighted in Vidmantas Vyšniauskas' and Anna Pilarczyk-Palaitis' research that focuses on Lithuania. The Polish word "tutejszy" – meaning a local person – has been embraced by some living in an ethnically mixed region near the Lithuanian-Belarusian border as a way of avoiding labels denoting ethnicity – Polish, Lithuanian or Belarusian – that are too restrictive or outright unpalatable or potentially harmful due to the region's difficult history. The article offers a nuanced qualitative exploration of the use of the various labels and their meanings for individuals and groups. Some associate the term local with backwardness and a lack of development, terms that are not infrequent when it comes to the description of borderlands. The specific local context and the complex difficult past events that the inhabitants experienced are a powerful reminder that memory, commemoration and remembering of the past are deeply embedded not only in national preferred narratives and policies and that cross-border settings involve – often competing – state actors. In her recent text, Antweiler (2024) argues that linking the fields of memory studies and studies of governmentality can bring fruitful insights. While she is focusing on the question of human rights, we want to emphasise that her argument is also valid in seemingly less essential cases such as the negotiation of local identities in local media.

Jaroslav Ira's article approaches language in a different way, he focuses on journalistic texts and conducts a comparative content analysis of two local newspapers published in the 1930s in two small towns (with fewer than five thousand inhabitants) in Czechoslovakia. The main focus of the research is the resilience of small towns, a topic that is as pertinent today at a time of a very different crisis as it was in the "long 1930s" and in the case of one of the small towns especially during the culmination of the Munich crisis. The analysis not only provides insights into narratives of the past and the possible future/s within the context of resilience at times of crisis but also paints a picture of local politics and intellectual life in the two small towns. We consider this topic important in relation to memory studies, as media content (for example, the discussions about and representations of the towns' prospects and futures) forms a (large) part of the images of the past that become part of today's collective memory (see also Reifová 2015).

Materiality

In the opening chapter of *Understanding Material Culture*, Ian Woodward outlines three ways in which material objects can be cultural (2007: 5–14). They can serve as social markers (in the sense of Bourdieu’s theory of distinction), as markers of identity (for example, the signs of religiosity), and as sites of cultural and political power (Woodward refers mainly to Foucault’s studies of hospitals or prisons). In other words, objects are cultural because of the embodied meanings that people associate with them. All these aspects of material objects also explain their agency when it comes to evoking or binding memories (Money 2007) and this has been widely explored in anthropology, sociology and material studies, often in studies focusing on gifts, souvenirs and other memorabilia (e.g. Hurdley 2007; Miller 2010). Karina Hoření’s article provides a significant example of symbolic work associated with material objects that are connected to difficult histories, in this case the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia, with the current owners redefining their meaning, their past and the ways in which they came to possess them. The stories that her research uncovered are often constructed around specific objects. The objects form part of the stories from the past and they play the role of evidence in them, the role of witnesses to the truthfulness of these stories. Or is the process reversed? The narratives are rooted in the present and outline a very logical origin story and link it to what exists now. As Hoření shows, this narrative is partly enabled by the possibility and – importantly – willingness to welcome the former German residents in their past homes. These trips are part of “homeland tourism”, which became popular with specific groups of Germans from the 1950s and particularly after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 (Kreisslová – Nosková 2023). These “tourists” have an unexpected role to play in the legitimisation strategies of the descendants of those who were newcomers post-WW2 during or after the expulsion of the original German inhabitants.

Borders and liminal situations

Difficult pasts often occur in liminal situations, when “something” changes: war and peace, borders, regimes. All these situations require new interpretations, the reality needs to be redefined. Similarly to the volumes of scholarship in the field of memory studies and materiality, there is also extensive scholarly work dealing with borders and liminal spaces (among the relatively recent publications there are e.g. Roberts 2018; Decker – Winchok 2017). This classic anthropological theme can also be identi-

fied in the contributions to this volume. Karina Hoření and Vidmantas Vyšniauskas with Anna Pilarczyk-Palaitis tell the stories of borderlands but the experiences in these liminal spaces are different: in the former, the reader is transported into an ethnically cleansed space, where the newcomers (and their descendants) explore, occupy, settle and interpret the newly acquired spaces of the town and its villas. In contrast, the latter, the case of the Vilnius region, depicts the realities of a relatively ethnically heterogeneous landscape where the “original” and deeply-rooted inhabitants have to communicate and negotiate who they are and what that means in different social (and historical) contexts. The same, however, applies in the case of the newcomers to the Czech/German town of Liberec/Reichenberg, where the border between us and them, Germans and Czechs, War and post-War, perpetrators and victims is being re-established.

In other words, the liminal spaces are reflected in the narratives of the people involved in discussions about the – not necessarily distant – past. (On the ways of remembering and forgetting in the Czech borderlands, see e.g. Wyss 2023) In the case of Baťovany/Partizánske, the pre-War and War histories are reconstructed as the history of the Baťa company. A significant – albeit short-lived and unsuccessful – turn of events arose with the Slovak National Uprising and the late-War and post-War history of the town is based on the existence of partisan subversion (framed as the first sign of the later proletarian revolution). The fact that without the factory, and thus Baťa’s capitalist enterprise, there would probably be no partisans is obscured, the “before” and “after” the Slovak National Uprising are very much connected, yet, this connection is concealed. The current inhabitants are left with language and stories as a way of dealing with the liminality that characterizes the past and thus with a potentially difficult history.

Methodological variety

The aim of this issue was to introduce a multidisciplinary view on questions of difficult pasts and their reflection and remembering. We present four articles that are informed by approaches from different disciplines – anthropology and sociology, culture and heritage studies, history and media studies. All the articles are based on qualitative inductive methods of research and interpretation. However, alerting readers to a few of our observations about the researchers’ positions is perhaps useful. We want to mention the researchers’ relationship to their researched topics and localities as two reflections in the articles struck us in particular and informed this final note in the editorial. In her article Karina Hoření writes:

The traditional and dominant expectation in the field of ethnography is that the researcher is coming from “outside” and trying to get “inside” (community, locality, topic) (Alvesson 2009: 157). But I have chosen the field where I was an insider from the beginning because Liberec is my hometown. [...] Therefore, I conducted what Alvesson calls ethnography at home, i.e. “a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a ‘natural access’ and in which s/he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants” (Alvesson 2009: 158). I was on equal terms with other participants because we shared stories rather than me listening to them. (p. 156)

The positionality of the researcher is always significant, but we think that when dealing with the past – particularly with difficult past events – and its contemporary interpretations, it is essential to reflect one’s own position and there are various positions reflected in the articles in this special issue – all the way from a well embedded insider to complete outsider. The latter is addressed by Vidmantas Vyšniauskas and Anna Pilarczyk-Palaitis when they point out that a misuse of the term “tutejszy” by the then inexperienced researcher caused unintended offence. In concluding this editorial, we would like to note that we recognise that the articles published in this issue do not simply reflect ways of remembering complicated pasts. In their reflection, they become a part of those pasts.

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Monika Metyková (University of Sussex, Brighton)

Barbora Vacková (Masaryk University, Brno)

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