

The Legacies of Soviet Repression and Displacement

The Multiple and Mobile Lives of
Memories

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on Maria Stepanova’s 2019 essayistic novel Памяти памяти (*In Memory of Memory*, 2021), which portrays the difficulty of articulating a commemorative familial narrative of the author’s Jewish Russian ancestors in the context of a largely repressed communal memory of Nazi and Soviet terror. *In Memory of Memory* reports the process of reconstructing a family history based on an archive full of photographs, letters, and diaries discovered after the death of the narrator’s aunt. The text portrays the fate of family members in critical moments of Russian and European history and points out the many unknowns which accompany the known episodes of the past. Stepanova’s text stands out from the large corpus of contemporary family history narratives in two interlinked points. First, it inverts the common order of critical discourse, as the literary text discusses theoretical concepts of memory studies which have been formed in reading literary texts, most notably the notion of “postmemory” (Hirsch 2008). Secondly, this discussion challenges a Western bias of memory studies, where political violence is mostly portrayed as a traumatizing element of a past era handed down through transgenerational transmission in a family context. Stepanova outlines that in Eastern Europe, the experience of totalitarian terror and political (mass) violence spread over several eras and multiple generations, creating a “traumatic enfilade” (Stepanova 2019, 74), which comprises even the narrator’s present, inasmuch as political repression and silencing violence is not strictly a matter of the past. Devoting as much space to reflection on the commemorator’s stance as to the family history, *In Memory of Memory* addresses the critical participation of analysis in forming the aftermath of terror and mass violence. This situates the reading of Stepanova’s text within a broader line of inquiry.

In the twenty-first century, literatures from Central and Eastern Europe have been marked by a boom of testimonies of involvement in twentieth-century totalitarianisms and mass violence. Texts such as Ulitskaya’s Даниель Штайн, Переводчик (2006; *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* 2011), Denemarková’s *Penize od Hitlera* (2006; *Money from Hitler*, 2009), Jelinek’s *Rechnitz* (2008;

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trans. 2015), Müller's *Atemschaukel* (2009; *The Hunger Angel*, 2009), Topol's *Chladnou zemi* (2009; *The Devil's Workshop*, 2013), and Stepanova's Памяти памяти (2019; *In Memory of Memory*, 2021) portray complicity with the Nazi occupation and Stalinist, Soviet, or other terror in contemporaries, and in later testimonies. Since understanding the past serves requirements of the present, the boom prompts the question: Why the interest in past complicities now? My hypothesis is that the texts address convergences between involvement in past acts of mass violence and current forms of participation in wrongdoings of humanitarian, political, ecological, or other natures in neoliberalism. While these issues differ in many respects, they are related in structural and historical terms. Structurally, both present the challenge of forming a nuanced notion of participation – the idea and promise at the heart of democracy, digital media, and consumer capitalism – that is highly valued yet poorly conceptualized, as current debates about complicity in legal and social sciences research highlight. Historically, both issues are related, since justifications of past involvement have established the terminology, narratives, and heuristics in which terror, repression, and acts of mass violence have been subsequently discussed by inscribing them into cultural traditions, thus forming the frame for negotiating problematic current involvement. The convergence is, therefore, of particular interest in view of the global crisis of political participation, which is currently undermined by an often unwilling but inevitable participation in detrimental economic structures that can be linked to the ecological crisis, the delegitimization of democracy, and the retreat to identitarian ideologies, not least in “memory wars.”

The implication of the analogy between totalitarianisms and neoliberalism is ambivalent, however. Complicities in past totalitarianisms may be paralleled with problematic current involvement to find models for comprehending issues of the present in cultural memory and/or to understand the genealogy of forms of social interaction and their justification. This analytical approach is counteracted by hedonistic, or consoling, readings, which evoke instances of past complicities in order to appease the sense that all is not quite well, even after the demise of Nazi and Soviet terror, by drawing attention to how bad, how much worse things have been, so as to create distancing. This effect has been studied in German mass media representations of the Shoah, which allow the creation of a “collective memory” by way of “identification with the past” at the price of permitting people to “consume this disconnected past as exotic alterity and even as sentimental entertainment” (Giesen 2004, 142). Authorial intent cannot prevent such readings. Literature eminently differs from juridical discourse – from which the term “complicity” is borrowed for sociopolitical debates – in that authorial intent is not decisive for the reception of a text. What matters is the complex relation between the identificatory options offered by the text and the readers' various ways of adopting them. This relational openness is decisive especially in the genre of documentary fiction, to which most of the

texts portraying historical complicities belong. The purpose of documentary fiction is neither to convey historical facts nor to form juridical decisions, but to confront audiences intellectually and emotionally with complex situations of ethically problematic involvement. Works of documentary fiction rely on the fact that all reading is based on participation, as texts speak to implicit readers, and that literature in particular requires the participation of audiences, be it the voice and imagination of the reader or the gaze of the spectator. Fiction, moreover, depends on a “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 2015, 208). Documentary fiction relies on reader participation to reflect on instances of historical participation in terror and mass violence. The point of this aesthetic reflection is neither to prove the readers’ distance from a “tragic past” nor to rule out such readings, but to draw attention to exactly the issue of distance – be it hedonistic or analytical. Both imply emotional distancing, while reading requires participation. This tension is negotiated in Stepanova’s text.

The chapter proceeds in four steps. First, it discusses the terminology employed to comprehend the present interest in past terror. Second, it considers the negotiation of critical works in Stepanova’s novel, which sets *In Memory of Memory* apart from many other texts of the genre and challenges the notion of an analytical distance from the past. Third, the chapter discusses Stepanova’s image of a “traumatic enfilade” or suite, which allows a description of how portrayals of complicity in Central and Eastern European literatures differ in their positionality from the portrayal of collaboration with Nazi occupation in Western European literature. Finally, the chapter expounds on a key material token of Stepanova’s skepticism about the possibility to form a coherent family narrative: a damaged porcelain doll, featured on the original Russian cover, which links the commemoration of terror to commodification and totalitarianism to neoliberalism.

Concepts in History, Analytical Distance, and Implication

The last section of *In Memory of Memory* traces the family narrative back to a scene of failed transmission: “The story of our home, as I heard it, began not a hundred years ago, but in August 1974. Grandmother reluctantly let my mother and me go off on holiday” (Stepanova 2021, 425) and died in their absence. The narrator’s mother seeks to pick up the lost thread; thus, the story is based on the sense of an unbreachable distance:

I remembered the terrifying story of the little girl who was slow to bring water to her sick mother and by the time she got to her mother, it was too late. Birds flew overhead, and one of them was her mother, and it sang: *too late too late I won't come back*. Somehow this story seemed to be about us, although no one had precisely said this. I just knew it, and I wept over the untouched water like an accomplice (как соучастница).

All my later knowledge was in light of this story: my mother spoke, and I fearfully tried to remember everything although I still forgot.

(Stepanova 2021, 425; for the original, see Stepanova 2019, 401)

Like the English “accomplice,” соучастница (*souchastnitsa*)¹ is a juridical term denoting co-participation (Aksenova 2016, 30–40). Under Russian domestic law as well as Anglo-Saxon common law, intent is decisive (Aksenova 2016, 35), not effect. Yet the intent to cause harm is missing from the narrator’s complicity in her mother’s non-listening, and not listening is not a crime. As in most usages of the concept of complicity in literary and popular discourse, what is at stake in Stepanova is a moral issue rather than a legal one; it is an issue that casts doubt on the very reach of the juridical principles of individual intent and autonomous action. For what the narrator has unintentionally participated in is the repression of experiences of Nazi and Soviet terror, the non-listening that is prerequisite to forming a “Socialist ‘master narrative’” of World War II that allowed individuals and groups to “keep silent about ... their complicity” with terror and mass violence (Schwartz, Weller, and Winkel 2021, 7). While the grandmother’s words are irretrievably part of the past, non-listening and silence have not ceased to be prerequisite to identificatory narratives of national Russian memory,² which, in turn, silently form the discursive context of Stepanova’s text. Non-listening and silence also inform Stepanova’s skepticism about restorative reconstructions of the past. For in spite of all of the narrator’s efforts to reconstruct a family narrative, what becomes particularly clear throughout the text – clearer than the family history itself – is that the (mostly unspoken) principles of cultural memory are hard to evade, or alter, as an individual. While *In Memory of Memory* is initiated by the grandmother’s unheard story, there is no compensation for not having listened, only the attempt at a supplementation of her story to balance the inherited social convention of silence, as mirrored in a catechism of denial that is foundational for the family story:

But although much was unknown or half-known or under a veil of darkness, I thought I knew a few firm facts about my family:

No one died in the Stalinist purges

No one perished in the Holocaust

No one was murdered

No one was a murderer

Now this seemed doubtful, or even simply untrue.

(Stepanova 2021, 323; see also 2019, 303)

Analyzing Stepanova’s poetics of challenging the heritage of silence requires a brief discussion of the concept of complicity, because its complications in juridical discourse render it productive in a literary text. As a legal term, complicity describes the way a crime is committed, namely, by aiding or abetting wrongdoing. Yet, complicity poses a challenge to the law, as it undermines

the principles of individual accountability and autonomous action: Though dependent on the actions of a principal wrongdoer, the accomplice is still autonomous insofar as aiding or tolerating wrongdoing makes a difference (Dupuy 2016, vii). Accountability is based on individual intentionality, which gives rise to a particular difficulty in current corporate and international law, whereby corporate and state complicity with human rights infringement and environmental damage often evades sanction, because corporations and states are not understood to have intentions. This paradoxically renders them actors without intent (Dupuy 2016, viii). Complicity thus marks the limits of legal discourse by pointing beyond the law's methodological individualism to fundamental structures of social relationality. This connectedness is exploited in the totalitarian strategy of reassuring the individual's sense of guilt while undermining individual action and personal accountability – a process outlined in Arendt's (2003, 147) maxim, "Where all are guilty, nobody is." Declaring everyone guilty is tantamount to labeling wrongdoing inevitable and – in ultimate analytical complicity – to dropping the differentiation between moral choices, just as it had been aborted in totalitarianism. Twentieth-century European totalitarianism might be regarded as linked with rather than contrasting to neoliberal (post-)modernity in that both have rendered complicity "a matter of course" rather than a subject of decision (Arendt 2003, 154).

To move beyond methodological individualism, legal research proposes an evaluation of the causal contribution to wrongdoing independent of intent (Lepora and Goodin 2013, 5–10; Guiora 2017), or notions such as "shared responsibility" (Lanovoy 2016, 11) and a "participatory conception of collective action" (Kutz 2000, 11). What participation means, however, is a second challenge that complicity entails, both in and beyond legal thought, because despite its popularity in political philosophy and popular parlance, participation is not a defined concept in Leibnitz, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, or other authors of classical modern thought (Prade-Weiss 2020, 9–11).

This issue is where literary discourse can make a decisive contribution. Assessments of historical involvement in wrongdoing rely on reconstructive narratives (Lepora and Goodin 2013, 13), and conceptual analyses are based on hypothetical scenarios (Gardner 2009, 57–76). The structure of these narratives – the relation between fictitious, documentary, and prescriptive legal speech – is hardly reflected. Yet, the medium of language is, in fact, a good model for approaching the complication of complicity, that is, individually responsible participation in a communal structure. Responsible individual speakers cannot but use preformed phonetic, semantic, and syntactic structures. The relational aspect of human action that poses a problem to legal thought is the focus of literary discourse, which foregrounds language as the principal medium of human interaction. This is as true for the spoken word as for texts. In analyzing literary discourse, the notion of complicity is useful not because it provides clarity (it does not) but because it marks

problematic participation, enmeshment, and degrees of responsibility that may evade straightforward legal culpability (Reynolds 2017).

Complicity is an ambivalent charge, as it is hardly functional within and too general outside a legalistic framework. Complicity can, however, be analytically productive if used not as a charge but as a marker for complexity. Analyzing the role of intellectuals in South African apartheid, Sanders (2002, 8–11) distinguishes “acting-in-complicity,” which can be legally and ethically judged, from an underlying “responsibility-in-complicity,” a connectedness with others that explains why even silence, non-listening, or inactivity may affect their lives. I suggest taking responsibility literally to examine how texts *respond* to such connectedness with others, as well as their critical role in transmission.

At the end of *In Memory of Memory*, in the narrator’s self-accusation of complicity with inherited conventions of silence and denial, there is no easy way to achieve “non-complicity” (Afxentiou, Dunford, and Neu 2017, 2). *In Memory of Memory* outlines no such stance of “narcissism ... that keeps the privileged subject at the center of analysis” (Rothberg 2019, 19) as a distanced judge untouched by the “implication” (Rothberg 2019) that others are accused of. Instead, Stepanova evokes what can be called “responsibility for discourse” (Mukerji and Luetge 2014, 181), a response to silence and denial that articulates a psycho-socially more productive approach to listening to experiences of terror and mass violence. Stepanova portrays the intricate parallel of participation in and distance from the past – participation in cultural conventions of silencing memories, and distance from past experiences of terror and mass violence – by inserting letters exchanged among relatives into the narrative voice.

In Memory of Memory can be read as a response to current disruptive memory politics and, moreover, to involvement in socially and ecologically detrimental structures of the present. It might, however, seem problematic to discuss the parallel between past and present complicities in terms of totalitarianism and neoliberalism, as both are highly politicized and often employed for polemical rather than analytical purposes. Stepanova does not employ these terms. And yet, in evoking them, this chapter takes a cue from Stepanova’s poetics of portraying past complicities parallel to scrutinizing the commemorator’s position in cultural memory. Just like “complicity,” the terms “totalitarianism” and “neoliberalism” are relevant for a discourse (such as Stepanova’s) that reflects on the point of view of the commemorator as inscribed in conventions of cultural memory, because they cast doubt on the claim to analytical distance. Totalitarianism is a historiographical concept used to describe a particular form of power that controls all aspects of life by way of a mixture of utopianism, scientism, and political violence (Shorten 2012, 4). The term was adopted by Italy’s fascism and Germany’s National Socialism, became a discursive weapon of the Cold War (Shorten 2012, 110), and a rhetorical stopgap in the present (Žižek 2002, 3). The same holds true for the economic term “neoliberalism,” which is “a rather broad and general

concept referring to an economic model or paradigm that rose to prominence in the 1980s” and comprises heterogeneous elements: an ideology, a form of governance, a policy, and a form of capitalism (Steger and Roy 2021, chap. 1, part 2). “Neoliberalism” has become a notorious catchphrase for criticizing the twenty-first-century state of affairs, yet the term has always been politicized inasmuch as it has been conceptualized as an ideological counterpart to Stalinist totalitarianism (Butterwege, Lösch, and Ptak 2017, 45).

While this chapter cannot do full justice to the debates on totalitarianism and neoliberalism, it seeks to highlight two discursive phenomena. First, theoretical concepts participate in historical processes as much as they describe them. Concepts may be regarded as archives of cultural memory (Müller and Schmieder 2020, 38), since their implications and incoherencies testify to sociopolitical ruptures and consequent hermeneutical crises (Hacking 2001). Secondly, while these incoherencies complicate exchange and foster polemic, they are also what permits the accommodation of different voices and divergent positions in social interaction. This is to say that while the claim to analytical distance enables an important form of discourse – namely, critique – theoretical language does not grant a position outside the discursive parameter of cultural memory but enables speakers to participate in discourse.

A striking case in point is the analogy between totalitarianism and neoliberalism that has been drawn, for instance, in political science, where the idea of a spontaneous market order has been criticized for bearing totalitarian markings, as it equates a self-regulated economy with civilization (Butterwege, Lösch, and Ptak 2017, 45). Zuboff (2019, 352) criticizes the parallel as inappropriate for understanding digitalized “surveillance capitalism,” and cites the belated comprehension of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism by twentieth-century contemporaries as a “vivid precedent for this kind of encounter with an unprecedented new species of power.” While it is true that the concepts of totalitarianism and neoliberalism describe very different phenomena, paralleling them is, still, no fallacy but a conventional hermeneutic strategy of cultural memory: transferring testimonies of past experience to unprecedented purposes. Yet, why is this a cue taken from Stepanova’s poetics?

Remediating Critical Concepts of Memory Studies

In Memory of Memory can be called an essayistic novel because it devotes as much space to discussing the stance of commemoration as to the family narrative. The text inverts the common order of critical discourse: criticism develops theoretical concepts in reading literary texts. Discussing key critical works of cultural and memory studies by Sontag, Kracauer, Todorov, Barthes, and, most notably, Hirsch’s *The Generation of Postmemory*, Stepanova folds critical readings of literature and memory culture back into the literary text. This folding pays heed to the fact that “literature often plays an outsized role in its ability to represent and broadcast trauma at the cultural level” (Madigan 2020, 46). Literary texts have been crucial in initiating media and

political discourses on terror and mass violence because such forms of violence destroy material and communicative testimony. Fact and fiction correlate in commemorative discourses on terror and mass violence because non-factual (or not indubitably verifiable) accounts are seminal to forming reconstructive narratives and a collective memory of forms of violence that seek to exterminate people and their cultural heritage (Stockhammer 2005, 79–81). Literary portrayals of terror and complicity thus relate as much to the portrayed past as to the respective commemorating present.

In Memory of Memory refers to critical works of cultural and memory studies as a “premediation” of a family history in the sense that “media which circulate in a given society provide schemata for new experience and its representation” (Erl 2009, 111). What structures the commemoration of an event is, to a decisive extent, “a canon of existent medial constructions,” which Erl (2009, 111) describes as “the narratives, images and myths circulating in a memory culture.” Stepanova’s novel suggests that in post-World War II memory cultures, the terms and theories conceptualizing commemoration belong to the premediators of personal memory just as much as literary forms. Perhaps most notable among them is the concept of trauma as a trace of an overwhelming event that undermines the capacity to recall the past in a coherent narrative (Sütterlin 2020), conceptualized in large part in readings of literary texts. Stepanova’s reflection on commemoration traces the folding of literary texts, their readings, and theorization in cultural memory as a premediating methodological ancestry that guides the search of a family history:

I was reading Marianne Hirsch’s classic work, *The Generation of Postmemory* (Поколение постпамяти) as if it were a travel guide to my own head. I knew everything she described immediately and intimately: the ceaseless fascination with one’s family’s past ... and the clinical boredom with which I roll my own contemporary world backward to that past... Any story about myself became a story about my ancestors.
(Stepanova 2021, 76–77, 2019, 69)

For those who belong to the generation(s) of postmemory, the ancestors’ past is “the inescapable pretext for their existence” (Stepanova 2021, 78), with the result that the latter is marked by an uncomfortable implication of survival: the taint of the illicit. Stepanova references Primo Levi to outline this effect:

In *The Drowned and the Saved* Primo Levi tells us with absolute candor: ‘The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died.’ Those who weren’t ‘the best,’ those who benefited (бенефициарам) from geographic and biographical chance, the luck of the draw ... are forced to act according to an invisible imperative.

(Stepanova 2021, 78, 2019, 71)

The term “postmemory” does not imply an end of memory but the transgenerational transmission of trauma to descendants who cannot have a personal recollection of the traumatizing events. It is, as Hirsch (2008, 106) writes and Stepanova (2021, 79) quotes,

not a movement, method or idea; I see it, rather, as a *structure* of inter- and transgenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove.

(Hirsch 2008, 106)

The “generational remove,” however, does not vouch for distance, as Hirsch (2008, 106) points out immediately before the passage quoted in Stepanova: “it reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture.” Rather than quoting Hirsch on the complication of distance in transgenerational commemoration, Stepanova’s text follows the insight and infers that an “uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture” is at work in the theorization of memory culture, too. She writes:

The problem is that the petri dish of postmemory – or new memory – is far larger than the circle of things and phenomena informing Hirsch’s work. Because twentieth-century history spread its cataclysms liberally around the globe, most people alive can consider themselves survivors to some extent, ... people with something to remember and to call back to life at the expense of their own today. And perhaps also because the world of the living and the world of the dead coexist in exactly this way: we live in their houses, ... but we forget these previous owners, we throw out their fragile reality, putting our own thoughts and hopes in its place, editing and abridging as we see fit, until time sweeps us into that corner where we ourselves become the past.

Each of us is in fact a witness to and participant (участник) of a lasting catastrophe. Our desire to shore up the past against rapid dissolution, and to keep it intact like the gold reserve, can easily become a fetish of sorts, something we can all sign up to, a zone of unspoken consensus. Events of the past hundred years ... have made us think of the past like a refugee’s suitcase, in which the dearest items of a life have been lovingly packed away.

(Stepanova 2021, 81, 2019, 73)

Hirsch’s term “postmemory” “was invented for and applied within the field of Holocaust studies” (Stepanova 2021, 77). However, like all concepts, it implies two fundamental claims of theoretical language: generalization and distance. *In Memory of Memory* doubts both. It challenges the mostly implicit claim of critical readings to analytical distance granted by terminology. In Stepanova, theory appears as a “memory practice” (Uffelmann 2013, 103) itself, as a

discursive form of participating in memory culture as – she quotes Todorov here – “a new cult, an object of mass veneration” (Stepanova 2021, 82). What is problematic about this participation is the synchronous devaluation of the present and “dehumanization of our own ancestors” (Stepanova 2021, 108). In Russian, the “participant (участник, *uchastnik*) of a lasting catastrophe” is set apart by only two letters from a (male) “accomplice” (соучастник, *souchastnik*), who is guilty – such as Stepanova’s narrator senses herself to be – of complicity in terror and mass violence by perpetuating social practices of repression and silencing. It is no contradiction that the self-accusation is raised when she does *not* listen to her grandmother, while the criticism of memory culture pertains to an *excess* of attention to the past. Both contribute to annihilating individual life by rendering it an element of a memorial economy that substitutes the past for the present and disposes of the dead in the very act that claims to preserve them. Stepanova (2021, 107, 2019, 92) observes that “this parasitical relationship with the dead is a profitable industry,” and she does not exempt her own endeavor from the exploitation of the past that undermines the present. In a “sobering realization,” she casts her reconstruction late in the text as “what a psychoanalyst might dismissively term a ‘fantasy’ (фантазия). In the place of respectable research, I had been occupied all this time with the Freudian family romance, the sentimentalized past” (Stepanova 2021, 321, 2019, 301).

The Russian original of this passage uses the English term “wishful thinking” (2019, 301). The wish is to recover a family narrative that ties the narrator to the past and, as the earlier criticism suggests, thus grants distance from the present by collapsing the distance from the past in identification. The text’s self-criticism includes the reader. If indeed “[e]ach of us is in fact a ... participant (участник) of a lasting catastrophe,” then the implicit reader of a reconstruction of that catastrophe is complicit in the paradoxical enfolding of continuity and rupture. The pleasure of reading the text and even critical interest in it share in the enterprise of remembering to forget – in the sense that engaging with a “‘comfortable horrible’ memory” may reassure audiences of a responsible outlook while diverting attention from the ethical complications it entails (Rothberg 2009, 9).

In this setting, engaging with the past turns into a form of consumerism that reduces the awareness of sequelae of terror and violence to symbolic capital, to a token of the commemorator’s social responsibility. The content of this token is replaceable but not arbitrary, as concern for past violence stands in for attention to current forms of political and institutional violence or economic injustices, which observers may be more uneasy to engage with because they may find themselves complicit in them. Reading *In Memory of Memory* in terms of a parallel between problematic involvement in past totalitarianisms and present neoliberalism follows the cue taken from Stepanova’s text, namely, that insisting on analytical distance misses the seminal albeit uncomfortable affectedness and involvement of the observer that is the very reason for analysis and criticism.

In Memory of Memory ties in with the (not solely) Russian literary tradition of prose as form of political commitment (Efimova 2022) by focusing on the affectedness by past terror and mass violence, and on involvement in their aftermath. Parallel to challenging the notion of critical distance, *In Memory of Memory* also raises doubts about the claim to generalization implicit to concepts. The latter becomes clear when the concept of postmemory is read in the context of Russian history, where its scope is broader than that outlined by Hirsch.

A “Traumatic Enfilade” Informs Commemoration

Stepanova’s remark “[e]ach of us is in fact a witness to and participant of a lasting catastrophe” may seem like a problematic generalization, but derives critical implications from the specific historical context that *In Memory of Memory* is concerned with. It has been pointed out that the “‘double experience’ of two totalitarian regimes – National Socialism and Communism ... sets the whole region” of Central and Eastern Europe “apart from the West of Europe” (Sindbæk Anderson and Törnquist-Plewa 2016, 2). This pertains to at least two aspects. First, “[c]ategories such as victims, perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders, often used in the Western discourse about World War II, are very difficult to apply,” as individuals and groups have often “shifted their roles with the many, often violent, turns in the history” of the realm (Sindbæk Anderson and Törnquist-Plewa 2016, 2). This is mirrored in Stepanova’s reflections on the complicity of commemoration. Second, and consequently, portrayals of complicity in terror and mass violence in Central and Eastern European literatures differ from negotiations of collaboration with the Nazi regime in, for instance, French literature in their positionality:

In Russia, where violence circulated ceaselessly, society passing from one space of tragedy to the next *as if it were a suite of rooms, a suite of traumas*, from war to revolution, to famine and mass persecution, and on to new wars, new persecutions – the territory for this hybrid memory formed earlier than in other countries...

(Stepanova 2021, 83; my italics)

The Russian wording differs: Россия, где круговорот насилия длился без усталости – формируя своего рода *травматическую анфиладу* (“Russia, where the cycle of violence continued tirelessly – forming a kind of *traumatic enfilade*”) (Stepanova 2019, 74). The French word *enfilade* denotes a suite of rooms where all connecting doors are aligned on a single axis. Crucial for Stepanova’s text is that the suite can only be seen from a point of view aligned with that axis, not from outside the alignment. Enfilades are part of feudal architectural grandeur. The notion of a “traumatic enfilade” (травматическая анфилада) suggests that starting with czarist despotism, the sequence of historical events in Russia (and the Soviet Union) in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries created a point of view from which an observer cannot claim to look *back* at a distanced past but speaks from within an ongoing transmission of terror and violence. Stepanova's claim is not that observers outside Russia are unable to comprehend it, but that engaging with the transgenerational transmission of psychosocial sequelae of terror and mass violence in Russia still operates within a political context of repression and terror. The imagery of a "traumatic enfilade" points out that her criticism of the "parasitical relationship with the dead" as a "profitable industry" (Stepanova 2021, 107) refers not only – verbatim – to the commodification of memory culture associated with the West but just as well – by silent implication – to the political instrumentalization of traumatic memory, especially in Eastern Europe and Russia.

A striking example of such instrumentalization is the new "Immortal Regiment" parade, which was first performed at the 2015 jubilee celebrations of the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany: calling people to display photographs of ancestors who fought in or supported the Red Army, the ritual performs the trope of the "nation as family" and adheres to the memory politics principle that "[t]rauma must ultimately always be transformed into triumph" (Fedor 2017, 307–314). Linking Soviet "eternal memory" policy to Putin's "project of neo-imperial reconstruction" (Koposov 2018, 207), the parade hinges on the notion of transgenerational transmission as "genetic memory," "a reawakening of the memory of the war ... willed by the ancestors, acting through the living via mysterious mechanisms" (Fedor 2017, 322). This turns the living into media for the dead to justify present and future wars as well as to stigmatize "critics of the Putin regime ... as descendants of Nazi collaborators" (Fedor 2017, 328).

While *In Memory of Memory* refers openly to Trump's claim to "make a country *great again*" to illustrate that "the world breathes the air of postmemory with its conservative reconstructions" (Stepanova 2021, 82), citations critical of Putin's memory politics are less easy to identify for the Western reader. This is due not solely to ignorance but also to a performative dimension of Stepanova's poetics: while there has been a broad range of private and media lamentations of the losses of Stalinism since Glasnost (Ries 1997, 92), the epoch of political investments in the collective memory of the heroism in overcoming National Socialism as a "justification for continuing" (Schwartz, Weller, and Winkel 2021, 6) the policy of repression, silencing, and violence did not pass away after the end of communism (Weiss-Wendt 2021). Omissions and allegorical representations – poetical devices developed in communism to communicate "memories of a (traumatic) past" that did not fit the narrative of the Soviet "eternal memory" (Schwartz, Weller, and Winkel 2021, 7) – are still apt. Present political pressure still aligns the outlook onto the past with the heritage of violence.

Yet, Stepanova's "traumatic enfilade" is relevant beyond the context of Russian memory politics. It raises doubts about the presupposition of

concepts such as *postmemory* that the transgenerational transmission of trauma anachronistically imports psychosocial sequelae of past violence into a present that is profoundly different from that past. Yet, political and socioeconomical realities often remain unchanged even after the demise of terror regimes, as Gobodo-Madikizela points out with reference to post-apartheid South Africa. She is critical of the imagery of the undead that dominates discourses on transgenerational transmissions of trauma, notably in the terms “haunting legacies” (Schwab 2010), “crypt,” and “phantom” (Abraham and Torok 1994). Gobodo-Madikizela (2021, 23) objects that “in South Africa at least, we are dealing with continuities of the past rather than its return.” Rather than being dead, the traumatic past often continues to inform the present of commemoration. While South African apartheid and Soviet communism differ in many respects, the criticisms of Stepanova and Gobodo-Madikizela intersect: from a non-Western point of view, understanding the transgenerational transmission of trauma and other psychosocial sequelae of violence is necessary because the violence inducing them is not strictly past. This intervention does not run counter to the conceptual foundations of memory studies. Trauma, as well as discourses that justify terror and mass violence, undermine the commonsensical temporality of before, during, and after the fact – the latter in that they often set the linguistic and heuristic frame for the subsequent moral and juridical evaluation of violence, with the effect that they are not strictly past but last. A striking case in point is the concept of “totalitarianism” that was seminal to the rhetoric of fascism and National Socialism and is still a technical term of political science – a concept employed, not least, to differentiate an economically detrimental form of rule from economically productive authoritarianism (Butterwege, Lösch, and Ptak 2017, 248).

Still, even with this background, Stepanova’s remark that “[e]ach of us is in fact a witness to and participant of a lasting catastrophe” may seem like a generalization typical of problematic identificatory strains of memory culture. As Sanyal remarks,

narratives that position reading subjects as traumatized victims of history (i.e., ‘we are all victims’) and those that conceive of subjects as universally complicitous with historical violence (i.e., ‘we are all accomplices’) both run the risk of muting any sense of the subject’s political agency and responsibility.

(Sanyal 2015, 12)

In Stepanova, this muting is the precise destructive effect of the “traumatic enfilade”: it undermines the principles of individual intent and autonomous action, based on which responsibility is juridically and morally judged. This effect is negotiated in the image of a small, damaged porcelain doll as a material token of the enfilade.

A Neoliberal Figure of Totalitarianism

Early in the text, the narrator tells of having bought “a tiny white china figurine, about three centimeters tall” (Stepanova 2021, 70) at a Moscow flea market. There had been a whole box of these figurines and “not a single one was intact, each differently mutilated, missing a leg or a face, and all the faces were scarred and chipped.” (Stepanova 2021, 71) The damage was no accident:

The little figures were made in a German town from the 1880s onward... . They were sold everywhere, in groceries and hardware stores, but actually their main function was as packaging – dirt cheap, they were heaped up as loose fill around goods, so that heavy things didn’t rub together or dent each other in the darkness. The little figures were in fact made to be chipped.

... My china boy seemed to embody the way no story reaches us without having its heels chipped off or its face scratched away. ... How only trauma makes individuals – singly and unambiguously *us* – from the mass product. And yes, finally, the way in which I am the little boy, the product of mass manufacturing and also of the collective catastrophe of the last century, the survivor and unwitting beneficiary (*survivor* и невольный бенефициар)...

(Stepanova 2021, 71, 2019, 64)

The original Russian is more graphic in stating that the figurine (фигурка) was not made to be chipped but “for mutilation” (иa увече; 2019, 63–64). While this is evocative of mass warfare, terror, and killings, *In Memory of Memory* regards the figurine as figure of survival in the “traumatic enfilade,” which produces individuality via damage. This allegory blends the past material culture with terror and mass violence, and relates them to the presence of the narrator as “the product” of both. In the Russian text, the фигурка (*figurka*) echoes an earlier passage: “Everyone else’s ancestors had taken part in history (были фигурантами истории; *byli figurantami istoriki*), but mine seemed to have been mere lodgers in history’s house” (Stepanova 2021, 23, 2019, 26). A later passage again invokes “heroes” (фигуранти; *figuranti*); (Stepanova 2021, 323, 2019, 302). A фигурант (*figurant*) is an ambiguous figure, denoting a “participant,” “poser,” or (silent) “background actor.” The English text can do justice neither to this ambiguity nor to the echo of the *figurant/figurka*. The echo is important, since the interpretation of the damaged doll as a figure of survival in the “traumatic enfilade” casts substantial doubt on whether there can be active participants, let alone heroes, in history. In other passages, however, *In Memory of Memory* leaves no doubt that there have been perpetrators in history who should be judged as responsible actors. It is, therefore, equally important that Stepanova’s text does not dismiss agency and accountability; instead, it casts doubt on them in the volatile device of an echo. The question of whether individuals were responsible participants,

background actors, posers, or “mere lodgers” is key to the reconstruction of a family narrative, and it proves to be largely unanswerable in Stepanova’s work. This is not only due to lacking information and euphemistic letters aimed at consoling addressees, but also because of the character of individuality brought about by the “traumatic enfilade.” The porcelain doll is a figure of the subject in totalitarianism as described by Arendt (1973, 407–408): the “isolation of atomized individuals provides ... the mass basis for totalitarian rule” because it is only among equally damaged but unrelated individuals that “complicity” can be spread “through the population until it has organized the guilt of the whole people under its dominion.”

In Memory of Memory does not turn traumatic individuality into triumphant survival. The allegorical leitmotif of the broken figurine explicates Stepanova’s reservation about the (transgenerational) trauma paradigm in memory studies, which is also voiced in a phrase already quoted above: “the world breathes the air of postmemory with its conservative reconstructions” (Stepanova 2021, 82). Stepanova is not alone in drawing a link between memory culture and conservatism. It has been argued that “[t]he formation of neoliberalism and the rise of memory are two strictly contemporaneous phenomena,” and that this is no coincidence. Unlike a *grand récit* of global progress and liberation, “[f]ragmented and subjective memories do not challenge the existence of capitalism” (Koposov 2018, 53–58). Focusing on family memory rather than historical utopias ties in with neoconservatism which, in turn, goes well with neoliberalism due to its insistence on the status quo (Koposov 2018, 53–58).

Against this background, the leitmotif of *In Memory of Memory*, the broken porcelain doll, can be read as a neoliberal figure of totalitarianism. Blending past commodity culture with terror and mass violence in totalitarianism, it provides a gruesome image of history, from which the neoliberal present promises to liberate. To be sure, Stepanova’s unfolding of the figurine as a figure of individuality in the “traumatic enfilade” points out that both are all but *past*, as traumas are handed down to the present, in which the figurine is acquired second-hand. This unfolding, however, is in turn informed by the neoliberal logic of replaceable individuality that can be made redundant without damaging the overarching system of productivity. The figurine “broke into pieces ... beyond repair” (Stepanova 2021, 73) soon after being introduced. The text’s ultimate paragraph depicts the narrator unwrapping a “parcel” full of similar, individually damaged figurines, placing the “items ... in a line” (Stepanova 2021, 428). The allegory of traumatic individuality does not hinge on the individual figurine. This is, on the one hand, the logic of allegory, in which, Benjamin (1998, 224) notes, “the allegorical observer ... betrays the world for the sake of knowledge” by regarding an individual as a mere occasion for a general thought. On the other hand, this abstraction (or “betrayal”) adheres to the logic of “the mass product,” which the figurines are. It is impossible to know which of the dolls is featured on the original Russian cover of Stepanova’s book which in itself is a mass product.

In criticizing terror, mass violence, and the emancipatory potential of identificatory trauma narratives, *In Memory of Memory* also reproduces the disregard for individuality for the sake of continuing production described as the logic of Stalinist terror:

In 1938, in what was later known as the Great Terror, ... the Gulag (лагеря) could no longer cope with the quality of prisoners. Production, so to speak, *ground to a halt*.

(Stepanova 2021, 401, 2019, 377)

The parallel is not an ethical one. Stepanova's differs in many respects from the Gulag's "production," notably in that her narrator seeks to preserve the figurines as "representatives of the population of survivors" (Stepanova 2021, 428), while Stalinist terror found the "solution" in "[a]nihilation" (Stepanova 2021, 401). The parallel is a structural one, and a poetic consequence of the "traumatic enfilade." If twenty-first-century individuality is shaped by traumatization, complicity with, and benefiting from terror and mass violence, then a look back onto this history inevitably finds victimization as well as problematic implication – not solely in ancestors but also in the commemorator's own outlook. The "traumatic enfilade" informs the present language with transmissions of acts of violence, such as when the Russian text speaks of лагеря (*lagerya*), modeled after the German *Lager* ("camp") instead of "Gulag." And it informs the structures of representation. Totalitarian terror and mass violence are not the same as neoliberal disregard for the individual, yet they are linked inasmuch as Stepanova's notion of the "traumatic enfilade" suggests that prior instances of violence and suffering condition involvement in subsequent instances. In Stepanova's text, prose is engaged as a form of political commitment by undermining comfortable assumptions about the distanced, non-involved position of criticism in favor of exploring complicities in commemoration.

Notes

- 1 Both editions are treated as authoritative, since "the English translation has been changed and modified from the original Russian in collaboration with the author" (Stepanova 2021, 431).
- 2 This pertains to multiple aspects, among them "[s]ilence on the Holocaust" in "Soviet history politics" (Koposov 2018, 219), popular indifference about Stalinist terror in the 2000s (Koposov 2018, 238–239), and the legal silencing of the victims' initiative Memorial (Koposov 2018, 259–260).

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