

MEMORY, GENDER, SILENCE: MORAL HISTORY IN (POST-)SOVIET RUSSIA AND THE BLURRY LINE BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE. *Summary*

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For several years I have conducted biographical interviews in Saint Petersburg, Russia, with Jewish women and men who survived the Nazi genocide. I undertook these interviews to learn about survival under the German occupation and life in the USSR after World War II. Each interview was accompanied by an invitation to lunch, dinner, or both, sometimes prolonging my visits into daylong encounters. Often, in conversations over coffee and tea I would receive information that was not given during the taped interview. In other cases, interlocutors asked me during the interview to turn off the microphone, or to erase sections of the tapes. These moments show that oral history is based on personal encounters that add a layer of complexity to this type of research and which deserve careful consideration addressing issues of privacy and ethics. These moments of broken or established silence also highlight how notions of the private and the public converge in such interviews, and how these notions affect both participants' positionality in the moment of research. Lastly, they highlight how public discourses reach into this private space or even define what is considered to be private.

Moments in which women spoke about their experiences during the war and touched on issues of intimacy and sexuality, or problems that affected them as gendered subjects, and especially moments in which they chose *not* to speak for the public about these experiences made these three dimensions of an interaction between the public and the private centrally apparent. They were powerful reminders that oral history interviews not only help us uncover previously marginalized aspects of history, but are also representations of culture. They tell us as much about the past as about the present in which this portrayal is developed and articulated.

Oral history, and its inherent problems, can provide important insights about the relationship between individuals and society, manifested here in the way in which people negotiate the relationship between the public and the private. Simultaneously, oral history as a methodology faces ethical challenges that require careful negotiation by both interviewees and interviewers. I offer some insights into how these

relationships and challenges are reflected in instances of silence about gendered experience. I utilize debates within the oral history movement and contributions of feminist scholarship to reflect on the role of public discourses for the formation of subjects experiencing and representing history. Since my interviews took place in post-Soviet Russia, I specifically explore how repercussions of Soviet discourses, namely restrictions on public and private communication, play out when notions of privacy and public become meaningful for first-person accounts.

During interviews, my interlocutors spoke extensively about their personal experiences in growing up, as Jews, in the 1930s Soviet Union, surviving World War II and the Nazi occupation, as well as life in the postwar decades. At the same time, they omitted some aspects of these experiences, apparently considering them not important enough to go on record, and shared them only in private.

The whole Soviet Union was affected by war and occupation and suffered from exploitation and extermination policies. My interviewees provided a portrayal of the occupation that also reflected upon experiences of ghetto internment, forced labor, systematic massacres, and various responses to the Nazi genocide of the Jewish population ranging from individuals' support for refugees from the ghettos to the participation of former neighbors in pillage and murder. Several of the women I interviewed (or whose interviews I was able to access elsewhere) at some point or other managed to escape the ghetto in which they were imprisoned, and joined a partisan unit.

At the center of my detailed analysis of practices of silencing are moments in which female narrators chose to restrict to private conversation their discussion of gender, sexuality, and gendered violence associated with participating in a partisan unit. My analysis expands on previous scholars' discussions of women in war, gender and violence, and gender and memory that highlight the marginalization of topics such as women's daily lives, sexual violence, women's health, and agency. Looking at the way in which intimate relationships within Soviet partisan units during World War II, real or imaginary, are represented in public and in private spheres, I suggest that omissions in the portrayal of women's experience result from limitations of Soviet discourse on the war, and from taboos regarding ideas of decency and sexuality encoded in notions of communist morality.

The analysis of one first-person account of gendered war experiences shows the connection between private and public norms of speaking in distinct discursive spheres. It also highlights forms of power that are exercised along and through this division, specifically, the power over historical representation. An interviewee, who requested to erase her portrayal of complex personal relationships that were often deemed illicit, personifies the difficulty of problematizing these and other practices of marginalization in constructing historical portrayals.

My reflection on the boundaries of speaking in oral history interviews and thus of memory exposes boundaries of the production of knowledge that are simultaneously rooted in a specific ideological context and in structures of power that are valid beyond a specific society. While the portrayal and celebration of the Soviet partisan, the gendered division of labor, and a communist morality are specific to Soviet

society, the marginalization of women's experience and sexual violence in accounts of the past is a long-term staple of historical representation, and it is closely aligned with ongoing practices of marginalization and devaluation based on gender.

My paper discusses an unsolvable problem in qualitative research, stressing a tension inherent in research aiming to reveal the intersection of systematic marginalization and self-limitation, a precondition to uncovering marginalized history. In sharing observations and reflections that emerged as central complications throughout my research, I identify important questions and make a few suggestions on how to approach them.