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**“CHILDHOOD IN CAPTIVITY” : DESCRIPTION OF THE  
“HISTORICAL MEMORY” FOUNDATION PROJECT  
COLLECTING MEMOIRS OF THE YOUNG VICTIMS OF  
NAZI PUNITIVE OPERATIONS, 1942-1944**

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The collection and study of the memoirs of young victims of destructive Nazi policies in the North-West of the USSR began more than a year ago. In February 2011 a research group made up of members of the “Historical Memory” Foundation<sup>i</sup> conducted their first research expedition, collecting their first interviews in and around the town of Lepel in Belarus. Work then continued in the border regions between Russia, Belarus and Latvia: in the Verkhnyadzvinsk and Sebezh districts and in the Velikoluksky District and the city of Pskov located a little further away. Some of the interviews were recorded in Latvia, where many of the eye-witnesses of the punitive operations of 1943-1944, who were children in the Salaspils concentration camp, live today. This research is part of a wider programme, “Raising the Status of the Former Inhabitants of Burned Belarusian Villages”,<sup>ii</sup> which is being implemented by the Belarusian Peace Foundation and the German foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”.<sup>iii</sup>

The long-term goal of the work, conducted as part of the academic discipline of oral history, relatively young within Russian historical studies, is to find and study new sources on the history of the Second World War. The academic communities of many Western countries have found accounts of eye-witnesses to events or phenomena of their time to be important sources. This discipline can be called interdisciplinary as it unites the research interests of specialists in different subjects: history, sociology, economics, political science and psychology.<sup>iv</sup> The development of oral history already has its own “history” as well. The stages of its development are connected with the evolution of ideas regarding eye-witness testimonies as a source: their reliability, the process of their creation, methods of analysis, and methods of storage of and access to these testimonies.

I think I would not be mistaken to state that the birthplace of oral history was the United States of America. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the postivist historiographical paradigm established the main tasks of historical science, which included the need to write history as it happened “in real life”. Among other alternative disciplines within the subject, the idea of studying the social history of modernity emerged. For example the work undertaken by Hubert Howe Bancroft recording the biographical memoirs of people living mainly in the west of the USA from different social backgrounds.<sup>v</sup> In the first thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century trust in this kind of source increased. Projects on American economic history appeared, and interviews with workers from large plants and factories were collected. In the 30s the literary programme “The Federal Writers’ Project”, sponsored by the US government and aiming to demonstrate the cultural diversity of the country, began to allocate funds to recording the biographical history of Americans. The importance of this kind of work was also recognised during the Second World War: it was obligatory for historians to be present in the US army to chronicle events as they happened, including recording conversations with direct participants in military activities.<sup>vi</sup> So specialists, describing the European theatre of military actions, had collected around 2 thousand interviews by the end of the war.

One of the founders of oral history in the USA, who actually brought this term into academic usage and also established contact with European academic and research centres, was Allan Nevins.<sup>vii</sup> He came up with the idea for his project, “The Oral History Project”, back in 1938, but it was only started in 1948 at Columbia University, where Nevins worked. It was during the implementation of this project that students collecting interviews first used magnetic tape for the audio recording of accounts of eye-witnesses to historical events.<sup>viii</sup> After this, major universities in the USA began open similar oral history programmes, projects and departments. In the 60s similar projects began to appear on a state level, with funding in keeping with the scale of the project: 1961 - a joint project between the US

National Archives and the Truman Library, 1965 – the Hoover Oral History Project, and others. In 1965 the oral history department of Columbia University had 89 national programmes collecting eye-witness accounts.<sup>ix</sup> In 1967 the Oral History Association was established; it has been publishing its journal, “The Oral History Review”, and holding annual colloquiums since 1973. Academic manuals and documents detailing the standard requirements for work involving collecting interviews with eye-witnesses appeared. The themes of the projects became narrower: surveys were made of the Indian population of the USA, of representatives of the feminist movement, of African-American women etc. Oral history continued to develop both on a national and an international scale. For example, in 1980 Columbia University began to publish the “International Journal of Oral History”.

A serious school of oral history was formed in the 60s in Israel. In 1953 the Yad Vashem memorial was established – a complex of museum exhibitions, memorials, and educational and research facilities. Its archive and library contain a large quantity of documents on the history of the Holocaust. Among these is a set of audio and video recordings of eye-witness accounts of these events. Oral History Associations were set up in the 70s in Canada, Mexico and Australia. In Britain one of the most famous oral history researchers, Paul Thompson<sup>x</sup> initiated an interview collection programme run by the British Library - the “National Life Stories Collection”. This included, among others, a project collecting accounts of Holocaust survivors. Before this, the BBC founded the “BBC Sound Archive” in 1936, which included recordings of programmes and interviews with famous people, examples of the language dialects of Britain, folk music etc. In Italy the emergence of oral history in the 50s and 60s was connected with the left wing political parties and movements. The first collections of accounts were related to the history of the working class and the partisan movement during the Second World War. In the 70s in Germany, Professor Lutz Niethammer, based at Essen University, conducted research into the lives of workers in the coal industry in the Ruhr Region between 1919 and 1930, recording interviews with his students. In Spain in the 80s projects collecting eye-witness accounts were of an ad-hoc nature, for example the research of Mercedes Villanova, who was the first president of the International Oral History Association. Oral history as a discipline was discussed during a seminar on modern history held at the University of Barcelona. A special journal on oral history was first published in 1989. In the Netherlands this discipline has been included in courses on historical methodology since 1980.<sup>xi</sup>

In the USSR “officially sanctioned” attention began to be paid to oral history in 1986. Before this interviews were collected unofficially by enthusiast academics and were not included in formal academic historical research. The first organisations to be involved in oral history were “Memorial” and the oral history club of Moscow State History and Archives Institute. The first official centre was opened in 1989 at Lomonosov Moscow State University.<sup>xii</sup> Over the last ten to fifteen years oral history modules have also become part of syllabuses in several universities in Russia.

Thus the “Historical Memory” Foundation’s project is to a certain extent the result of the development of this discipline in Russian academia. In our view the main trends of this development in the modern period are, firstly, the narrowing of research themes from broad questions to chronologically and geographically limited topics. Thus, the “Historical Memory” Foundation’s project is limited to the collection of testimonies from young victims of destructive Nazi policies, only related to the punitive operations of 1943-1944 in the border regions of Russia, Belarus and Latvia. Secondly, over the last 10-15 years the collection of sources of oral history in Russia has often been undertaken by international

collaborations. This is also the case in the interview collection work undertaken by the Foundation, in which both the Foundation's own employees and specialists from Russia and other European countries have been involved.

This project is also very socially significant. It demonstrates the role of memory, at times quite contradictory, of the experience of tragedies in war time and an acknowledgement of responsibility for actions committed in different countries. Although the inhabitants of burned villages are an unacknowledged category of victim all over the world, it is quite significant that such a project raising their status began specifically in Belarus. The events and memories of the Great Patriotic War are part of political discourse there and are considered at state level. In Russia it is mainly private researchers and NGOs, such as the "Historical Memory" Foundation, who devote attention to this. An important result of this project is that the German organisation "Kontakte-Контакты" has provided financial compensation to the inhabitants of villages in the Verkhnedvinsk Region of Belarus who suffered during the punitive operations of 1943-1944.<sup>xiii</sup> By contrast, the young Latvian state, searching for its own identity and place in Europe and in European history, emphasises the other side of this period. In Latvia the legionaries of the Waffen-SS, whose members comprised a significant part of the punitive forces active in Belarus and Russia in 1943-1944, are officially regarded as heroes and freedom fighters.<sup>xiv</sup>

Alongside expeditions, members of the research group also studied archive documents and photographs, comparing information from Soviet and other sources (encrypted messages of Soviet partisans, Nazi orders and reports, newspaper articles and notices from the period of German occupation, testimonies from witnesses and captured participants in the punitive operations, exhumation documentation and other expert reports, German photographs of the punitive operations, photographic materials from the original investigations into Nazi crimes etc).<sup>xv</sup>

In selecting the methodological principles for direct work with eye-witnesses and for the actual process of conducting the interviews, discussions among the academic community both regarding the status of eye-witness accounts in historical research and the criteria for recording these accounts were considered. The main problem and task for the organisers of the work and the research group was to create, in the academic sense, a source which could meet the high criteria of the discipline, and which could be used both by Second World War historians and researchers from other fields.

Specialists from different countries became interested in this issue as the discipline of oral history developed. The status of the eye-witness in academia, and also the process of conducting an interview itself, were first described by Norton Cru in 1929. He considered accounts by witnesses to events to be a reliable source, but one that should only be obtained if, in his opinion, the specialist conducting the interview does not impose his/her own opinion on the interviewee, using leading questions to make the witness say what the interviewer wishes to hear.<sup>xvi</sup> Documents and declarations listing the criteria required for recording interviews have been published by the American Oral History Association. Methodological issues have been discussed in the "International Journal of Oral History", mentioned above, edited by the well-known historian Ronald Gril, as well as in numerous colloquiums and seminars.

Rather than setting themselves the task of making their own contribution to the development of the theories and methodologies of oral history, the authors of this project have chosen the approach that best fits their understanding of the historical process - the main actor of which being the human - and decided to follow the recommendations

developed by one of the most authoritative organisations in the field – the American Oral History Association. The first guidelines were published by this organisation in 1968. The most recent are dated 2000.<sup>xvii</sup> The criteria set out in the latest version were used as a reference point for the research group from the “Historical Memory” Foundation when conducting interviews and recording the accounts of eye-witnesses: awareness of the importance of the work; observance of copyright laws relating to the recording, taking into account the interests of the source; and conducting interviews in accordance with the wishes of the eye-witness (granting his/her requests not to record certain phrases or passages, not pushing him/her to talk about topics he/she wishes to avoid etc). Audio and video recordings were made using high quality equipment in a format suitable for archiving. One point should be mentioned in particular: that although the recordings were made as part of a project on a narrow topic, the archives created are intended for future use in the research of other experts looking at similar topics. The “Historical Memory” Foundation’s team will continue to work on this topic, and the Foundation itself invites collaboration with interested academic institutions and researchers working in this discipline.

The significance of this work and the aim of recording the accounts of the eye-witnesses of the punitive operations of the Nazis and their collaborators in 1943-1944 is connected with discussions regarding the status of oral history sources for academics. The social calling of this research material is obvious. In Europe oral testimonies became popular, largely, in relation to the development of the study of the Holocaust. They are actively used in research connected with the study of victims of totalitarian regimes, or, in English-language historiography, in projects documenting international human rights. The latter includes, for example, the work of the Russian organisation “Memorial” in compiling sound archives related to the Gulag, led by the well-known French historian, the Sovietologist Alain Blum.<sup>xviii</sup> Our project collecting the testimonies of victims of Nazi destructive policies is also partly included in this discipline (the cohort of interviewees were, in 1943-1944, representatives of the civilian population, not those serving in the army, and were, in addition, young children at the time). As stated by the well-known American historian, Holocaust researcher Daniel Goldhagen, the accounts of victims help us to understand the crimes of the executioners. Thus, the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are characterised by many academics, using the term coined by the French academic, A. Wieviorka, as the “era of the witness”.<sup>xix</sup>

Aware of all the criticism of oral sources, we, nevertheless, agree with the researchers who speak of the huge potential of oral testimonies in the historian’s work. They allow the researcher to re-establish a connection, which is usually inaccessible to academics; this can be described as a chain “researcher – person – event”. It is living people who give us the opportunity to be fully aware of the fact that history is a humanity subject – i.e. a subject about humans. Of course, as with other sources, the accounts of eye-witnesses have their own specific features and require critical analysis. It is important to understand that when dealing with accounts, the historian should not only look for facts but also observe the interpretation of them and the way they are reflected, and understand that each time the same story is told it will be told in accordance with personal and collective memory.<sup>xx</sup> We should be aware that in this case we are also dealing with the workings of human memory. In working on recording the accounts of young victims of Nazi policies, on top of this, we also had to deal with the features of children’s memories. As shown by the American psychologist Ulric Neisser, people store unique events and turning points in their lives in their so-called “long-term memory”.<sup>xxi</sup> Even early studies of human memory conclude that

memories are transformed into mind images. According to these studies, events, which are accompanied by strong emotions, remain in the memory of all people, and are put in a part of the mind which stores the memories of particularly striking events.<sup>xxii</sup> But the retelling of these events is coloured by the witness's personal experiences, opinions, and personality. This is of particular value to specialist historians, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and others.

The archive of oral testimonies which the research group from the "Historical Memory" Foundation plans to collect will, clearly, constitute a rich information source for researchers working in many fields of the humanities. As is the case with any other source, the testimonies we collect cannot be used as the only basis for a historian's conclusions. In deciding to include oral testimonies as a source in academic work, the researcher should analyse the information they contain critically. Above all, it is necessary to be aware of the advantages of using this source, as well as of the "traps" the researcher may fall into if the source is followed word-for-word. The accounts should be looked at rather as material for the historian's work, for analyses whose quality will depend on the skill and conscientiousness of each academic.

An example of the use of these testimonies in conjunction with other historical sources can be seen in the exhibition "Childhood in captivity: the fates of children taken to Latvia, 1943-1944", which was first displayed in Moscow at the State Museum of the Contemporary History of Russia between 19 January and 15 February 2012. Two kinds of sources were used as a basis for this exhibition. Firstly, photographs from private collections taken by German photographers who were part of the Nazi punitive forces operating between the end of 1942 and 1944 in the border regions of Russia and Belarus, as well as photographs from the Belarusian State Archive of Films and Photographs, the Latvian State Historical Archives and the German Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv). Secondly, the accounts of eye-witnesses and victims of punitive operations, who were children at the time. These testimonies were presented in the exhibition in the form of two short films. In part of the exhibition space partitioned off to eliminate background noise a screen was set up showing clips of interviews with victims regarding the punitive operations: the capture of the inhabitants of burned villages, their transfer to concentration camps, including those in occupied Latvia, and the subsequent separation of these people, as a result of which some remained in German-occupied Latvia and others were taken to German (to concentration camps and to forced labour). The second film of accounts of eye-witnesses on life in the Salaspils camp and with host families was shown in the second room. At the end of this article we have appended a transcript of one of the interviews recorded by the research group from the "Historical Memory" Foundation. Extracts from this were shown in one of the films in the exhibition. The interview itself was also published.

So, after reading a text describing the historical context in which the punitive operations of 1943-1944 were carried out and forming a definite visual image of these events from looking at the photographs, visitors to the exhibition were then able to gain a deeper understanding by hearing the accounts of eye-witnesses. The same events which, for the majority of people nowadays, arouse horror at the cruelty, can be understood better through the eyes of the people for whom this terrible past was a reality, and for whom it was even daily life at the time. This decision was calculated to provoke an emotional reaction in people –primarily a reaction of empathy, and at the same time to cause them to overcome feelings of indifference and to reflect on the displays of violence, on their personal relationship to these tragic pages of history and on how humane we ourselves are. The

exhibition also gives an idea of the experience of using oral sources and specific ways in which they can be used in certain fields of the humanities and popular science disciplines.

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<sup>i</sup> The “Historical Memory” Foundation is a Russian non-commercial organisation, which was founded in autumn 2008 in order to further academic research into relevant issues of Russian and Eastern European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. More information about the foundation and its publications can be found at:

[www.historyfoundation.ru](http://www.historyfoundation.ru)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.mestovstreichi.info/ru/stranitsi/povishenie-statusa-spashchichsya-zhiteley-sozhzhennich-dereven-2> (accessed on 01.03.2012)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.stiftung-evz.de/rus/> (accessed on 01.03.2012)

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, The Forest History Society in the USA: <http://www.foresthistory.org/About/fhshistory.html> (accessed on 01.03.2012); oral archives of the Ford Motor Company, and the work of Clark, A. F. The challenges of cross-cultural oral history: collecting and presenting Pulaar traditions on slavery from Bundu, Senegambia//Oral History Review. 1992,- 20(1),- P.1-22; Peterson J. S. Black automobile workers in Detroit, 1910-1930// The Journal of Negro History. 1979,- vol. 64,-no. 3. P. 177-190 and others.

<sup>v</sup>History of oral history: Foundations and Methodology. Lanham;New-York;Toronto;Plymouth, 2007. P. 10.

<sup>vi</sup>For example, Marshall S.L.A. Bastogne: The Story of the First Eight Days...Whitefish, 2010 (written in 1946) etc.

<sup>vii</sup> Nevins A. The Gateway to history. New-York, 1962.

<sup>viii</sup>History of oral history, P. 12.

<sup>ix</sup>Ibid., P. 14.

<sup>x</sup>Thompson P. The Voice of the Past: Oral History. Oxford, 1988.

<sup>xi</sup>Wallenborn H. L'historien, la parole des gens et l'écriture de l'histoire: le témoignage à l'aube du XXI scècle. Loverval, 2006. P. 38.

<sup>xii</sup>Ivankiev A., Khubova P., Sharova T. After Glasnost: Oral History in the Soviet Union // Memory and Totalitarianism. Oxford, 1992. P. 89-90, 93.

<sup>xiii</sup>[http://www.historyfoundation.ru/ru/fund\\_item.php?id=259](http://www.historyfoundation.ru/ru/fund_item.php?id=259) (accessed on 01.03.2012).

<sup>xiv</sup>Dyukov, A. R. “Takticheskaya kollaboratsia”? K probleme otvetstvennosti uchastnikov kollaboratsionistskikh dvizhenii za prestupleniya protiv chelovechnosti, sovershenniye na okkupirovannykh territoriyakh SSSR// Svobodnaya Mysl. 2011. № 6. P. 127 – 136.

<sup>xv</sup>For published documents on this topic see, for example : “Unichtozhit kak mozhno bolshe...”: Latviyskiye kollaboratsionistskiye formirovaniya na territorii Belarussii, 1942-1944. Sbornik dokumentov/ “Historical Memory” Foundation”; Compiled by A.R. Dyukov, V.V. Simindey and others; Accompanying article by A.M. Litvina. Moscow, 2009.

<sup>xvi</sup>Wallenborn H. L'historien, la parole des gens., P. 122.

<sup>xvii</sup><http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/oral-history-evaluation-guidelines-revised-in-2000/> (accessed on 01.03.2012).

<sup>xviii</sup>Déportés en URSS: Récits des Européens au GULAG/ sou la directon de A. Blum, M. Craveri, V. Nivelon. Paris, 2012.

<sup>xix</sup>Wieviorka A. L'ère du témoin. P, 1998. P. 124.

<sup>xx</sup>History of oral history., P. 46, 59-60.

<sup>xxi</sup>Thinking about oral history: Theories and applications. Lanham;New-York;Toronto;Plymouth, 2008. P, 36.

<sup>xxii</sup>Bergson H. Matière et mémoire. P, 1939; Edelman G. M. Biologie de la conscience. P, 2000.