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### **PhD Dissertation assessment**

**Ludmiła Maria Władyniak**

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*Memory in the borderland. A study of collective memory in the former East Prussia region of Poland and the Sudetes in the Czech Republic*

In this review I am elaborating on my earlier assessment and consequently reiterating some of its contents but I am also commenting on candidate's treatment of the suggestions expressed in the review submitted for the "small defense".

### **Overall assessment**

Ludmiła Maria Władyniak is interested in the quite trendy topic among social scientists today – the memory studies. The thesis investigates the collective memory revival in the two borderlands regions in Central Europe: the former Sudetes region in the Czech Republic and the southern part of the former East Prussia region in Poland – places which became the state peripheries after 1989. The main research question concerns functions of interactional and communicative collective memory, the role of collective memory in the ethnic, cultural and

historic borderland of Central Europe. The reason behind academic revival of collective memory studies is certainly connected with post-transformational experiences of Eastern and Central European countries since 1989 but it is also rooted in more general XXth century collective traumas, and in the most current phenomena of memory emancipation from the official historical discourses. There is no easy way to invalidate the significance of remembrance, even if it contributes to dysfunctional consequences. The collective memory is the link between our past, present and the future – for that reason the study which undertakes such a topic is potentially significant and valid, such as Ms. Władyniak’s dissertation.

The study focuses on the interactional and visual character of the remembrance. By means of appropriately chosen methods: a photo-elicitation interview and semiotic analysis the author reaches original conclusions. The study reveals that “The ritualised communicative memory observed in the two borderland regions is the *functional element* between family-based communicative memory and official, institutionally generated cultural memory—the latter, in this case, is still fragmentary. The ritualised communicative collective memory is a bottom-up created, shared memory maintained through interactions among members of the borderland community (community of memory)” (p. 14). The analysis of the material revealed that the ritualised memory has an adaptive function not only in reference to traumatic past events but most of all in reference to current condition and future prospects, which is especially important in the borderland regions which have been plagued by post-transformational economic problems.

The first version of the thesis was already a valuable work but since then it has been further improved. Both theoretical and methodological part have been expanded and completed.

The conceptual framework is explained in more detail. The core theories for the conducted research which in the first version of the dissertation were Jan Assmann’s concept of communicative and cultural memory, as well as Wulf Kansteiner’s interactional theory on the collective memory, and Erving Goffman’s theory of face and face-threatening acts, were supplemented by Randall Collins’ theory on interaction rituals, Jeffrey C. Alexander theory on cultural trauma and some other minor theoretical additions such as Ernest Gellner concept of nations and nationalism (suggested in my first review). Using Goffman’s face-work theory as analytical tool for the gathered data should be particularly appreciated because the practical potential of Goffman work seems to be widely respected but rarely exploited!

In my review I pointed out that whereas the photo-elicitation method was actually presented and discussed, the visual semiotic analysis was not, although it was indicated as one of the major methods used in the research. In the new version of the dissertation a part explaining the semiotic approach to visual materials was added and also the question of metonymies which was also somehow “undercooked” in the first version was addressed and explained in a more satisfactory way. Nevertheless, I am still not entirely convinced that coding pictures with metonymies, not connotations, offers any cognitive advantage but this is certainly a secondary issue.

The chapter “Memoryscape of Central European Borderlands” is now more accessible thanks to maps showing prewar and present borders and ethnic structure.

I appreciate that the analytical part of the dissertation has been changed and refined. I think that problem with possible overinterpretation is still present (which is probably an inevitable risk in the social sciences) but now it is contained within safe limits of clear structure and logical arguments.

The editorial work which in the previous version of dissertation was unsatisfactory. I am glad to proclaim that now it is almost perfect. “Almost” because the Red Army is still defending Nazi Germany instead of defeating it! (“The monument was placed by the communist government in a small park in the middle of the town to commemorate the Red Army defending Nazi Germany and winning the Second World War”, p. 77).

## **Conclusions**

In sum, this is a remarkable dissertation: original and intellectually stimulating. I am pleased that the final version of the dissertation lacks deficiencies I pointed out in the previous one. I particularly like a strong connection between theoretical framework and research issues. The candidate never forgets about the theory and while working on empirical data always applies theory which, unfortunately, is not always the case because many authors treat the theory and the body of acquired knowledge as if they were separate entities. The author’s differentiation between various types of memory, which unveils hidden dimension of collective identity, is one of many examples of this beneficial symbiosis between theory and research.

It should be also mentioned that the research took place in two different borderland regions of Central Europe, located in two different countries but with a similar history and experience. The research was conducted using the same methodology in both places in order to observe common features of the phenomenon of remembrance in the borderland. The research (fieldwork, transcription, analysis) was conducted in two official languages of the borderland: Polish and Czech, and then it was translated into English. I really have a high regard for the momentum of this endeavor, and for the diligence of the author, as well.

In my opinion the doctoral dissertation of Ludmiła Maria Władyniak meets all requirements of PhD thesis and therefore I recommend her academic work *Memory in the borderland. A study of collective memory in the former East Prussia region of Poland and the Sudetes in the Czech Republic* for the defense.

Krzysztof Olechnicki