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Interview with Olesya Orlenko, in charge of the International Relations Department at the Historical Memory Foundation in Moscow, conducted in February and October, 2011, in Paris

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Interview with Olesya Orlenko, in charge of the International Relations Department at the Historical Memory Foundation in Moscow, conducted in February and October, 2011, in Paris

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Editor's notes

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Structure, Purpose and Organization of the Historical Memory Foundation

PIPSS.ORG - Could you introduce the Historical Memory Foundation (<http://historyfoundation.ru/>) and its staff?

Olesya Orlenko: As is indicated in our web site, the Foundation is a non-profit organization. Our goal is to provide assistance to researchers on Russian and East-European history of XXth century. It means that when we have an interesting project in our hands we look for the possibilities to help the authors to carry it out. It can be the publication of a book, a conference, a long-term project etc. Sometimes we are the authors of the projects. Therefore our organization function as a foundation and as a research center as well.

The director of our Foundation is Alexander Dyukov. We are three researchers and an executive director. We also have a press attaché and an editor of our Internet site. The foundation was established thanks to the initiative of four persons: three former students of the RGGU¹: Daria Valaieva, Aleksandr Dyukov and I as well as Vladimir Semindiei from the historical faculty of the Riga University. Valeieva has defended her dissertation on contemporary history of the XXth century. Semindiei specializes in the history of the Great War, the history of Latvia in the first half of the XXth century, in particular during the two world wars but also in Latvia's external relations between the two world wars. Dyukov will soon defend his dissertation on "Anti-Semitism in OUN's Ideology and Practice", and I shall soon defend mine on Western historiography, and more specifically on negationism (see the list of publications at the end of the interview). For the time being I am in charge of establishing international cooperation partnerships. The Foundation operates under the authority of a Supervisory Council (popechitel'nyj soviet), composed of reputable historians such as the RGGU rector Efim Iosifovich Pivovarov and a member of the Academy of Sciences of the Russian Federation, Valeri Aleksandrovich Tishkov².

PIPSS.ORG - You seem to think that Russian historical research needs more financial means and contacts with the international research community. Do you intend to fill the gap? Do you consider yourself a scientific body or more of a tool to make encounters happen?

Olesya Orlenko: Yes, we have a scientific ambition in this way. We feel that some topics, some aspects of the war, are still very little known: they are mentioned here and there but real historical research on these topics is either embryonic, or badly disseminated, or used for political purposes. For instance, Ukrainian nationalism: it is a very complicated question. Some historians try to represent them as fighters for freedom. But they were not simply traitors to the motherland neither. The study of their actions toward Polish or Jewish populations in Ukraine rejects this Manichean interpretation and shows that there were contradictory elements in the region at that time. We are trying to reach a deeper level of knowledge on this issue.

For instance, we have launched an Internet data bank of the victims of nationalist terror in the western territories of the USSR. The idea comes from Dyukov, who was partially inspired by the “memory book” published by the Memorial organization, in which are listed all the victims of Stalin’s political repressions. This project is conducted in partnership with the Archives. Unfortunately, their financial support has temporarily stopped; but we are hoping to solve this problem shortly.

One of our objectives is also to diffuse scientific papers to our Russian audience. We collect information about publications in the states of post-soviet space. We translate articles written by foreign scholars into Russian and we publish compilations of articles or proceedings of conferences. Our journal (*Zhurnal rossiiskikh i vostochnievropeiskikh istoricheskikh issledovaniy* <http://histudies.ru/>) is also used for this purpose. The aim here is to produce a high-level scientific journal, a publication where we can put together articles of historians working on the European, Russian history of XXth century and on related historical issues. We have the staff to translate German, French and English articles into Russian. As I have mentioned, we publish the books of other historians such as Vladimir Makarchiuk, who is working on the history of Western Ukraine. We also play a role in increasing the dialog between the Russian audience and foreign experts through many ways: the journal we publish, the conferences we organize etc. For example with the assistance of the foundation a lecture of Thomas Will, who is prosecutor in the Central Office for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes, took place in RGGU.

PIPSS.ORG - Where does your funding come from?

Olesya Orlenko: We have no permanent source of funding. Our funds are collected for specific projects. To get funds we need to propose a project and then look for funding. The sources are very various. The money comes from other foundations such as the Foundation Russkiy Mir (<http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/en/>) and the World Congress of Russian Jewry (Boris Spiegel <http://www.wcrj.org/>)³, the Institute of Eurasian studies (<http://www.ea-studies.ru/>), and recently we got an important grant from the Gorchakov Foundation (Fond Im. Gorchakova) that we are using also for some of our current projects. Sometimes we work with partners who assume some part of the costs.

Partnership

PIPSS.ORG – Nearly all of you come from RGGU. Do you have permanent partnership with other Russian laboratories studying the war?

Olesya Orlenko: No, not in a permanent way. The Foundation is independent, with no obligation towards any university or academic institution – a status that enables us to lead freely the research projects we want, with no pressure of deadlines or publication requirements. On some projects, we are working close with the Holocaust Foundation (<http://old.holocf.ru/eng/>), led by Ilia Altmann. For example, there was a conference in April 2010, co-organized by the Center and Foundation Holocaust, the Central Museum of

the Great Patriotic War, and our group (we also proposed a panel in it). The conference was about the Nazi extermination policy, and it was open to the public. I think it was a great achievement. Especially in view of the fact that it was the first big international conference about the Nazi extermination policy in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. And I am talking not only about the contacts, though we got very important ones. But we were trying to invite people with different points of view, with different historiographical traditions working on similar topics. You may see the result in the volume of the conference proceedings (*Voina na unichtozhenie: Natsitskaia politika genotsida na territorii Vostochnoi Evropy*). You will find there the articles of very interesting young historians from Ukraine, Latvia, USA, etc.

We have established short-time partnerships, short-time grants and funding in collaboration with the museums of the Great Patriotic War and the State central museum of contemporary history of Russia in Moscow, St Petersburg Institute for History of the Russian Academy of Sciences etc. We are seeking to establish this kind of partnership with foreign research centers.

PIPSS.ORG – How do you select your partners abroad?

Olesya Orlenko: My colleagues and I, we have our own research work. Of course we know the authors working on the related topics. We are crossing with them in scientific events. Otherwise, if we are looking for their collaboration, we are contacting them through their colleagues of institutions they are working in. Sometimes the researcher is recommended to us by their colleagues at their turn. Our range of experts working on such a special issues is not so wide, even on a world scale. We are a “young” foundation and we do not have strict bureaucratic procedures in selection of proposals. Nevertheless, we are choosing projects led by researchers who hold their work on a high scientific level. But we are ready to help young researchers as long as they are using a serious historical approach.

PIPSS.ORG – What are your current projects implying international cooperation?

Olesya Orlenko: At the time being, I am preparing a program for European students, a 2-3 year program with a set of seminars on post-Soviet historiography, history, archives, etc. The plan is attract pre-doctoral students to Moscow (and to Russia in general, to Belarus, and Moldova in the future perhaps), to explain to them our archive system, to give them a sort of practice. And as a result it should encourage people to work on Russian and East European history. The best students will be given six-month grants or a one-year grant to write their PhD in Russia (Ukraine, Belarus, etc.). I have just begun to look for partners in European universities, and once we have found them we can launch the program.

As far as international cooperation is concerned, we have contacted Bad Arolsen’s International Tracing Service in Germany⁴. They are our partners. They accumulate information about deportation from the East, and they are taking part in our events. One of their members took part in our conference on borders and population transfer in Western Europe in 1938-1947. Last year it took place in Lvov, Ukraine.

PIPSS.ORG – Did you recently take part in international conferences, and on which topics?

Olesya Orlenko: Very recently, we presented a paper in the international symposium « Nazi Camps in the Occupied Soviet Territories », organized in Paris by the USHMM (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), Yaha-In Unum, Paris IV-Sorbonne and the ENS (Ecole Normale Supérieure)⁵. And I think this conference was very successful because indeed they invited researchers holding different points of view and there was a real discussion, sometimes even hard, but very useful and interesting. And it was a great opportunity to meet people representing many interesting research groups, talking about their projects, launching new approaches of studies. It was actually a real pleasure.

I will also take part in the conference about the Nuremberg trial held in Luxembourg in November, the 23rd which is organized by the University and the Russian embassy.

PIPSS.ORG – Mr. Dyukov and Mr. Simindiei study the complicated questions of western USSR. Did they establish contacts with local researchers?

Olesya Orlenko: Contacts have been more or less easy to establish depending on the country. But we are about to establish scientific collaboration with our Lithuanian colleagues and several months ago, we also signed an agreement of scientific collaboration with the Lithuanian Institute of war legacy⁶.

With our Estonian colleagues, it is a little bit more fluid. We are far from knowing everything that is going on in the historical field there, but we know some strong historians in Tallinn University, in Tartu University (Magnus Ilmjärv, Tonu Tannberg). Sometimes we see them in conferences if they come. We are following their publications. But unfortunately they are rare guests in Russian scientific events. But we would like very much to collaborate with them closer, to see them more often in conferences, to publish their books in Russian.

According to what we see, Estonian historians have come a long way and gained ground since the collapse of the USSR: they have overcome the phase where their only preoccupation was to denounce the Soviet regime. There are a lot of publications of reference on the history of their country in XXth century.

Regarding, for example, the Latvian historians, we are always opened to collaborate with them. On the site of our Journal you may see the summary of issues. You will notice that we are publishing a lot of authors from Latvia. On my opinion, Latvian historians are made a big step in the researches about Holocaust history; you may see the changes made in the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia (<http://www.occupationmuseum.lv/>) in Riga. But the problem is that a lot of researchers from Latvia have very strong connection with current politics.

Relationships with Other Kinds of Structures

PIPSS.ORG – Your efforts to open a permanent cooperation with Western researchers seem to converge with the aims of the «Institut de la Démocratie et de la Coopération», headed by Mrs Narochinskaia and based in Paris. Do you have a partnership with it, formal or not?

Olesya Orlenko: She is not our partner but we are in contact. We have a common field of work and in some projects we are working together. We actually work with her organization “Historical Perspective”, which concerns historical topics only. The “Institut de la Démocratie et de la Coopération” is more concerned by political issues. Since we want to keep a distance from political approaches, we do not work with the Institute. For instance, Mrs Narochinskaia is a member of the Commission against Falsification of History.

PIPSS.ORG - What is your position on the creation of this Commission?

Olesya Orlenko: It exists so there is nothing we can do about it. We are not in the Commission. It actually does nothing. They started to declassify some documents but the process is very slowly. They even published some interesting documents and research works. But I do not really see any activity apart from that.

PIPSS.ORG - Is the Commission supervising your work?

Olesya Orlenko: No, the Commission has no right and power to do that. As I said we are an independent organization.

The Fields of Interest

PIPSS.ORG – You explained earlier that the initial purpose of the Foundation was to cast light on sensitive historical issues. Indeed, the Foundation site as well as the journal site shows that you specifically study repression in the former USSR and sensitive topics related to the Second World War. Obviously, apart from

scientific curiosity, there is a contemporary stake in your enterprise. Why do you think it so important today in Russia to cast light on those particular topics?

Olesya Orlenko: You know, the problem of the past is very painful for the countries of the post-Soviet space, as well as in the former socialist countries. For those who know well enough the past and the reality in these states it looks difficult to understand why we are stuck in such “little” questions whereas there are more important ones: human rights development, economic issues, etc. But the point is that all these “little” questions are related for them with the tendency to look for justice, to establish the national identity, etc. Historical concepts are present in political discourse, but the problem is that that they are not clearly defined by historians themselves. Historians let politicians make historical conclusions. But the difference between historian and politician consist among other things in the fact that the first one infer something from deep researches of wide range of sources, and his conclusions depend from the information gathered from the sources. And such an approach to history and politics is dangerous for science. So the goal here is to show that the historical assertions induced by political persons as proofs of their decisions are more complicated than they are trying to look like.

PIPSS.ORG - Does it mean you're not – or less – interested in the other aspects of the “Soviet century”? For example, do you plan to widen your research on war to life in the rear? Would you support research on topics not related to controversial issues or do the latter wholly define your research orientation?

Olesya Orlenko: Yes, of course we would. We are open to discuss new projects, to launch new researches. The range of the Foundation's interests and researches is related to the scientific interests of each of us members of the Foundation. Each of us is an expert in his field. But when we have a perspective with good specialists involved, we are ready to work on a new topic. But we can not cover everything ourselves.

PIPSS.ORG - You mentioned your partnership with the Holocaust Foundation, and a lot of your publications are dedicated to the controversy between the Baltics and Russia about the Shoah. Is it incidental? Do you have projects concerning the link between collaboration and Shoah in Russian territories too?

Olesya Orlenko: The Russian Holocaust Center and Foundation and it's one of the leading institution in Shoah history in Russia. We are in contacts with them when Shoah topics are related with our researches on Nazi extermination policy. It happens quite often, but not always. The Shoah history is one of my field of interests. But foundation does not limit itself with this subject. We are interested in Nazi and Soviet policy towards Jews. We wish to grasp the difference between the policies developed towards the Jews and towards other national groups in Eastern Europe.

For example we have contacted Father Desbois and are discussing cooperation with him. We mean to underline the particularity of the Holocaust in the East by deepening our knowledge of what happened locally.

With Yahad we'd like to proceed with research on Moglino concentration camp (about 8 km from Pskov). It's an absolutely unknown topic. The Yahad team has a big experience to deal with the history of concentration camps in Eastern Europe. Otherwise, we are hoping to attract attention to this camp through the collaboration with Yahad.

PIPSS.ORG - What are your plans concerning the study of war violence and occupation policy more generally?

Olesya Orlenko: We are collecting the memories of the victims of the extermination policy during World War II. Last August we travelled in Latvia, Belorussia and Russia with our cameras, dictaphones and papers to visit cities and villages, looking for the people who were displaced by force from their territories to the concentration camps in Latvia (and then even further in Germany or in Russia) during the punitive expeditions of 1943-1944. As a result we are preparing a visual exhibition of videos, pictures, and

documents (“Ugnannoe detstvo”). It will be opens in the Museum of contemporary history of Russia next January.

The history of collaboration fully entered in scientific discourse last 20 years something. Nowadays the topic is very used by journalists and politicians. The subject is very interesting, it helps to put into the light a lot of controversial issues related with political, social, cultural history if the Western territories of USSR.

PIPSS.ORG - Do you work with Kovalev, Irlicyn, Epifanov, Semiriaga? Are you in touch with German specialists such as Pohl, Dieckmann, Gerlach, Berkhoff, Boeckh?

Olesya Orlenko: Yes, we are working with our German colleagues. With Mr Pohl we have conferred in the conference of Yahad in September. Otherwise we are in close contact with F. Roemer, B. Bonwech, and many others.

We would like to work with Dieckmann. His work on pogroms in Lithuania during the summer 1941 is a real breakthrough in historical science. In order to intensify our work in this direction we want to create an international research project regarding the practice of violence in Europe. But I prefer not to talk about it too much now before we get the opportunity to start it.

The Access to Documents

PIPSS.ORG - How would you characterize the access to the archives in Russia?

Olesya Orlenko: Actually it depends very much on which archive. Since the end of the 1980s, a lot of documents are accessible. I gave a lecture a year ago about archives in Russia in Göttingen University. I was asked about this problem. My idea is that in Russia sometimes it is still complicated with the archives. But sometimes it is related to some archive technical problems or to the declassification of a document. In Russia you have to call the commission of declassification; its members meet in a session to decide if the access restriction the documents examined can be lifted. It is a long and bureaucratic process. But it is true that declassification work runs slowly in Russia.

The state archives are free for access without any limits. The departmental archives have their one rules. Anyway, a large part of the documents in Russia are declassified now. For example, in the Archive of the Ministry of Defence (TsAMO), at least 75% of the documents are declassified. As far as the FSB is concerned, the documents for example about Stalin’s repression are in majority declassified. It is one of the most accessible funds (with the exception of personal cases, here you need a permission of the family members of the person). In the FSB Archives, parts of the funds are opened to researchers now. The same is true for the NKVD documents in the state archives. There are archives in Russia which are not accessible like the Foreign Intelligence Service’s (SVR, Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki). But even them are publishing collections of documents from time to time.

Of course Russia is not the best example for archive access. As far as the situation with other post-Soviet states is concerned, I can say that in Belarus 95% of the documents are declassified. The Director of the National archives of Belarus has the right to declassify the documents himself. In Ukraine, for example, the SBU (Secret Service of Ukraine) archives are opened and a large number of documents are accessible and digitalized. But some of these states have also restricted access to the archives. For instance in Lithuania the Special archives (former KGB archives) are accessible since 2007 only with a special permission of the Lithuania's State Security Department.

Notes

1. Russian State University for the Humanities (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet)
2. For an overview of the council, see <http://historyfoundation.ru/ru/council.php>.

3. Vsemirnyi kongress ruskoiazychnogo evreistva.

4. <http://judaism.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=judaism&cdn=religion&tm=89&f=00&tt=2&bt=0&bts=0&st=10&zu=http%3A//www.its-arolsen.org/english/index.html>

5. On September 19-20th, 2011.

6. For details, see http://historyfoundation.ru/ru/fund_item.php?id=184.

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Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlowski and Vanessa Voisin, "Interview with Olesya Orlenko, in charge of the International Relations Department at the Historical Memory Foundation in Moscow, conducted in February and October, 2011, in Paris", *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* [Online], Issue 12 | 2011, Online since 17 December 2011, connection on 03 October 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/pipss/3895>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/pipss.3895>

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