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Remembering Communist Violence
The Bulgarian Gulag and the Conscience of the West
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This article problematizes the rhetorical appropriations of memories of violence by focusing on a collection of narratives of former labor camp inmates in communist Bulgaria. The collection, published in the United States in 1999 under the title *Voices From the GULAG: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria*, was edited and introduced by Tzvetan Todorov and represents an effort to interpret the meaning of communist political violence. By examining Todorov’s strategies of interpretation, the article discusses how the personal narratives of camp survivors are appropriated in a rhetoric of conscience, directed at Western public opinion, whereby their historical and political significance is transformed. The analysis demonstrates how the painful accounts of victims are discursively subsumed into an ideological discourse about a morally superior, democratic West and a corrupt, totalitarian East.

Keywords: political violence; communism; totalitarianism; collective memory; rhetorics of conscience

The year 1989 signifies in contemporary history the end of the communist system and the structures of political oppression that supported it. Scholars today are attempting to write the history of “actually existing” communism (e.g., Burawoy & Verdery, 1999; Verdery, 1996), yet this task is complicated by the emergence into public discourse of previously suppressed personal accounts of the atrocities committed by communist regimes. The memories of former prisoners of internment camps are among the most painful testimonies of political violence under communism. As Humphrey (2002) has observed, “atrocity produces a legacy of individual suffering which itself remains a political resource for both reinjuring and healing” (p. 1).

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This article explores the tensions that arise as memories of political violence are rhetorically constructed and contested. It problematizes a particular effort to interpret the personal narratives of survivors of political violence under communism. The specific historical context is the period of totalitarian oppression in communist Bulgaria during the 1950s and 1960s. The article presents a rhetorical analysis of a collection of narratives by former camp inmates, which was published in the United States as a book under the title *Voices From the GULAG: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria* (Todorov, 1999). The collection was edited and introduced by Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian-born philosopher living and working in France since 1963. Todorov’s introduction to the book provides an interpretive framework for understanding the narratives that follow. In addition to inmate narratives, the volume includes court testimonies of former camp guards and communist party officials as well as brief interviews with inmates’ family members. However, the prisoners’ stories, together with Todorov’s lengthy introduction, compose the larger body of the text and serve as the main focus of this analysis.

By examining Todorov’s rhetorical strategies in *Voices From the GULAG*, this article focuses specifically on Todorov’s reappropriation of inmate narratives and discusses how he reframes them for the purposes of constructing a rhetoric of conscience directed at Western public opinion. The article situates Todorov’s interpretation of communist political violence in a particular rhetorical situation, informed by historical context, and interrogates the appropriation of survivor narratives in a discursive project that seeks to fulfill particular ideological goals. The central argument proposed is that as a result of Todorov’s reappropriation, the historical and political significance of survivor narratives is transformed. By deconstructing Todorov’s rhetoric of conscience, the analysis seeks to demonstrate how the local, personal, and highly controversial accounts of victims are discursively subsumed into a transnational, institutional, and largely noncontroversial discourse about communism as an “Evil Empire.”

**Roadmap for the Argument Ahead**

The remainder of this article is organized in five main sections. First, to set the historical context, the article briefly describes the nature and scope of Bulgarian labor camps under communism and their legacy in the postcommunist period. Following is a discussion of the theoretical foundations of the analysis, elaborated in two subsections: “Political Violence and Communication Inquiry” and “Memory and Its Uses.” Next, the article moves to an “Analysis” section, organized in two subsections as well. One, titled “The Rhetorical Situation,” addresses notions of exigence, audience, and speaker’s positionality; the second, titled “Structural Interventions,” deconstructs the organization of Todorov’s text.

Having established a baseline for its claims, the article then proceeds with a section titled “Discussion: The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” which demonstrates how Todorov strategically reconstitutes inmates’ narratives as proofs in his rhetorical
project. Finally, the “Conclusion” section brings together the different strands of the analysis and draws out some implications for future research on the rhetoric of political violence.

A final caveat about the purpose of this article is in order. Although this analysis challenges Todorov’s rhetorical project, it by no means wishes to deny or diminish the atrocities committed by communist regimes in Bulgaria or elsewhere in the world. The article’s intention is not to arrive at a “correct” interpretation of the memory narratives of victims, nor does it wish to suggest, in a relativist swipe, that no interpretation of political violence is ever possible. Rather, the article’s central goal is twofold. First, it aims to demonstrate how the narratives of victims are circumscribed by ideological discourses that transcend immediate localities and temporalities. Second, it seeks to elucidate the partiality of moral absolutes used to judge or motivate political oppression.

The Historical Context: Bulgarian Labor Camps

Between 1944 and 1962, approximately 100 internment camps existed on the territory of Bulgaria, a country of 8 million people (Todorov, 1999, p. 40). These camps were modeled on Soviet forced labor camps, or gulags.2 The Soviet Union and other communist countries systematically denied the existence of forced labor within their borders, calling the camps “corrective” and “re-educational” instead. In reality, the camps were machines for political oppression and punishment of people suspected of holding or expressing oppositional political views (Open Society Archives, n.d.). In addition to their political purpose, the camps also served the needs of centralized state economies. They were often established next to major construction sites, dams, mines, or stone quarries, where inmates were used as free labor (Gregory & Lazarev, 2003). After Stalin’s death in 1953, the camps, both in the Soviet Union and in other communist countries, were reduced in number but retained their horrific nature.

Voices From the GULAG (Todorov, 1999) focuses on labor camps in Bulgaria and contains six central inmate stories of three men and three women. The men were interned at the Sunny Beach camp,3 located next to a stone quarry by the Bulgarian town of Lovech. The women were interned at various camps, but at least one of them spent time in the Skravena camp, adjacent to the Lovech stone quarry. The inmates’ stories offer graphic accounts of the atrocities committed in the camps. They testify to daily brutalities, beatings, tortures, hunger, inhuman labor, and death at the quarry. As in other concentration camps, the most brutal physical abuse was conducted by specially selected inmates, called brigade chiefs, who were convicted criminals.

The survivors recall the “transgressions” for which they had been detained as well as the stories of other inmates and the reasons for their internment. Most were arrested for seemingly trivial acts, such as socializing with foreigners or being too outspoken about some aspect of social reality. Some were harassed because their families had been part of the intellectual or cultural elite in precommunist years.
Others were detained as a result of being “reported on” by known or unknown informants. One woman was sent to the camps based on a report by her husband, a military officer, who had a mistress and wanted to get rid of his wife (Todorov, 1999, pp. 118-119). In another case, a young boy of about 17 was detained at the request of his own father, who “wanted to give his son a good fright for a few days” (Todorov, 1999, p. 91). Unfortunately, the teen did not survive for more than 4 or 5 days in the camp, and his father had to face the horrible consequences of his actions when he showed up at the gate to take his son home (Todorov, 1999). One inmate summarizes the reasons for his detention in the following way: “They tortured me because I listened to Western music, wore tight pants, enjoyed American dancing, and because my father was a well-known figure in the world of culture before the Communist takeover” (Todorov, 1999, p. 54).

As these testimonies suggest, the camps were aimed at criminalizing any form of dissent or deviation from the dominant ideology. The exact number of those who were imprisoned and those who died in Bulgarian camps is hard to determine because police archives have been destroyed and many witnesses are no longer alive. According to one estimate, more than 23,000 people were sent to labor camps in Bulgaria between 1944 and 1962 (Bakardjiev, 2003). Yet most of the inmates were not political dissidents in the conventional sense of the word; they did not belong to underground political organizations, and they had never stood trial or been convicted of a crime. Many were not even aware of the nature of their “crimes.” Camp internees were not granted political prisoner status. They were generally labeled as “hoodlums,” “scum,” or “parasites” that had to be eliminated for the general protection and benefit of society. As a way to get out of the camps, some inmates invented and confessed to crimes they had never committed in the hopes of getting a real court trial and being sentenced to time in a regular prison (Sugarev, 1991).

Many of those directly responsible for the camps’ creation and administration in Bulgaria are now dead. Legal trials against those still living have been frozen by a series of changes in government, legislation, and political twists, and no spectacular convictions have been pronounced (Encheva, 2001). Public action aimed at redressing past injustices committed by the communist regime came in the form of monetary compensation. In 1991, the Bulgarian Parliament passed a law for the rehabilitation of repressed individuals and awarded them one-time financial compensations. In November 2003, the law was amended to provide for monthly pensions to surviving victims of political repression (Aleksandrova, 2003). As a result of this parliamentary action, Bulgarian public opinion was split between those who supported these measures and those who distrusted the stories of survivors and discounted them as opportunistic attempts to gain economic or social advantage.4

Although the historical facts surrounding the camps in Bulgaria are contested and the political responses to them are questionable, the memories of survivors testify to the brutalities of the regime toward some of its own citizens. Since 1989, accounts of camp survivors have entered the public sphere through documentary and fictional
films, media articles, memoirs, and scholarly publications. Other survivors, however, have never told their stories publicly and have refused to take advantage of the monetary compensations offered to the repressed. In Bulgaria, as in the Soviet Union, “there were those who wanted to forget what had happened to them” (Sherbakova, 1992, p. 106). Thus, the drama of remembering and forgetting the violence of communism is still present in postcommunist societies, although it may not be always publicly visible.

Theoretical Foundations

*Political violence and communication inquiry.* The problem of political violence transcends disciplines and challenges the limits of explication. Narrow definitions have focused on the infliction of pain and injury to the physical bodies of individuals (Williams, 1981). Broader definitions relate the use of excessive force to breeches of moral norms and raise questions about the legitimacy of violence (Elias, 1982; Honderich, 1989). Repeated attempts to categorize political violence (e.g., Conteh-Morgan, 2004; Schlesinger, 1991; Tilly, 2003) have produced no theoretical consensus. Yet regardless of debates over definitions, what is of greatest concern to communication scholars is the relationship of political violence to signification. More than a mere exercise of force, acts of political violence are intended to signify the power of the tormentor. As Humphrey (2002) observes, “the spectacle of violence is a strongly rhetorical politic because it is created largely for its effect on victims and witnesses” (p. x).

Foucault (1977) has shown how in premodern times the exercise of violence was a prerogative of the monarch, whereby the public spectacles of torture and execution were intended to demonstrate the sovereign’s absolute power over his subjects. With the emergence of modern nation-states, power was increasingly invested in impersonal institutions and the state claimed a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence over its citizens (Weber, 1948). The various forms of concentration camps that emerged under different political regimes represent one of the most extreme products of state-sanctioned political violence. Indeed, Giddens (1985) has argued that all nation-states have the potential to implement totalitarian measures of oppression and justify them through the need for political mobilization.

In the context of globalization, the monopoly of the state over violence is continually challenged, and it has been argued that “anyone with the means to terrorize can make a claim to power through acts of atrocity which, momentarily at least, usurp the prerogative of state biopolitics and sovereignty” (Humphrey, 2002, p. 4). Via the modern mass media, political violence can permeate the public sphere and reach diverse audiences, thereby becoming the object of competing interpretations and rhetorical appropriations. These interpretations are inevitably entangled with the struggles of various groups to construct and maintain shared identities, memories, and histories (Anderson, 1991; Bruner, 2002; Gillis, 1994).
Memory and its uses. The term collective memory was coined in 1950 by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980), who established several central principles for theorizing collective remembering. Halbwachs argued that collective memory is constructed through communication and depends on the existence of an “affective community” (p. 31) that can sustain it through its communication practices. In addition, he theorized memory narratives as embedded in spatial and temporal dimensions and as reconstructions, which always serve purposes rooted in the present (Halbwachs, 1980).

Halbwachs’s (1980) theorization makes clear the relationship between collective remembering and rhetoric. The transition of personal narratives into collective memory and, ultimately, into codified narratives of history is accomplished through rhetorical processes. Only through context and words are suffering bodies transformed into symbols that are used strategically in rhetorical acts. As Hauser (2000) has pointed out,

We seldom directly encounter the anguished body advancing a public appeal to redress a public problem. The web of discourse that forms around its suffering mediates its claim. Claim making, in short, requires framing for a body to appeal to the conscience of its public and move to exert pressure on official bodies authorized to act. (p. 138, emphasis in original)

Thus, the difficult task of rhetorical analysis is to examine the mechanisms of framing and the resulting meanings of political violence.

In this context, an important point of departure is to focus on “practices of interpretation” (Schlesinger, 1991, p. 6), and a growing body of interdisciplinary work examines such practices as they relate to different historical contexts (e.g., Apter, 1997; Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Kaiser, 2006). Within this larger framework, collective memory — and particularly the memory of suffering and trauma — has attracted the attention of scholars who have sought to theorize the sites and processes of remembering and forgetting (Biesecker, 2002; Nora, 1989; Passerini, 1992; Sturken, 1997).

In reference to the memory of communism, the collection and publication of camp survivor narratives begin the difficult work of remembering communist violence and making sense of it (e.g., Bardach & Gleeson, 2003; Critchlow & Critchlow, 2002; Kent, 1997; Passerini, 1992). By moving from the realm of private memory to the domain of public memory, survivors’ accounts call for a revision of a period of history and seek to restore the personal identities of victims that were obliterated by the grand narratives of ideological systems. However, this painful reconstruction has a peculiar air of incompleteness because its truths enter public consciousness not as facts but as subjective stories of suffering. Personal narratives change with every act of telling, and their “tellability” (Ochs & Capps, 2001) is linked to the narrators’ ongoing identity projects. This instability of subjective memories opens them up for multiple
interpretations, whereby the victims’ voices can be reappropriated into larger historical and ideological discourses.

Analysis: Framing Violence

The rhetorical situation. A rhetorical approach to the signifying function of political violence recognizes that interpretations are always embedded in particular “rhetorical situations” (Bitzer, 2000) and that meaning is not inherent in any particular “text” but is negotiated within “interpretive communities” under various constraints (Fish, 1980). A critical perspective rethinks the rhetorical situation as “an event that makes possible the production of identities and social relations” and insists on the need for radical contextualization of rhetorical analyses as a way to avoid essentialist and universalist claims (Biesecker, 1989, p. 126). Within this theoretical perspective, this analysis explores the tensions that arise as memories of political violence are rhetorically constructed and contested.

To situate the analysis of Todorov’s (1999) rhetorical intervention, three important issues need to be considered: the historical exigence for his rhetoric, his positionality as a rhetor, and the nature of his audience. The historical discourse that provides the exigence for Todorov’s rhetoric is rooted in the history of the two World Wars and the Cold War and often represents the struggle between East and West in ideological terms. British historian Mark Mazower summarizes this discourse and the questions that emerge within it in the following way:

Modern mass violence — culminating for Europeans in the mid-century evils of the Holocaust and the gulags — cries out for explanation, casting an allure that sober historians have done their best to dispel and ignore. But the public thirsts for more. There is an element of voyeurism here, but also a deep desire for reassurance and guidance: what lessons should be drawn from the extreme forms of barbarism, suffering and heroism evident in the 1940s? (Mazower, 1999)

Mazower (1999) adds that such questioning has a more explicitly political dimension as well, which can be rephrased in the following terms: “What does all this mean for communism? We know where we stand on the Nazis, but communism collapsed only yesterday.” Todorov’s rhetorical task, in response to the questions posed by this exigence, is to offer an interpretation of the meaning of labor camps under communism that would be palatable to his Western audience.

At this point, it might be interesting to imagine an alternative exigence as it might be formulated within a local Bulgarian context. Bulgarian sociologist Lilyana Deyanova, whose work deals with the relation of memory and biography to the post-communist transition, suggests that Bulgarians today are facing the paradox of a past
that is becoming “more and more unpredictable” (Deyanova, 1994, p. 35). This conundrum leads them to ask themselves questions such as these:

Did the communists come to power on 9 of September 1944 as the result of a “popular uprising” against a monarchist-fascist dictatorship, without direct intervention by the Red Army, or as the result of a coup d’etat by a gang of traitors and terrorists supported by Russian guns? Was Bulgaria ever fascist? Who saved the Jews from deportation to Nazi concentration camps? The communist party or King Boris III? (Deyanova, 1994, p. 35)

A comparison between the two exigencies, as suggested by the two sets of questions posed by Mazower and Deyanova, respectively, reveals two different levels of engagement with the past. In the first extralocal case, there is no uncertainty about “the facts” of history, but there is a need for interpretation and, ultimately, for moral judgment of the meaning of these facts. In the second case, which represents the local Bulgarian context, the past appears to be unstable, unknown, and unresolved. The nature of “what happened” has not yet been fixed. Hence, moral judgment is temporarily suspended.

In addition to the problem of exigence, Todorov’s positionality as a speaker is important in examining his rhetorical intervention. Some of his recent work has been devoted to interrogating the nature of totalitarianism, the Holocaust, and life in the concentration camps (Todorov, 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2001). He has often stated in his books that he grew up in a totalitarian country and has claimed firsthand knowledge of totalitarian society. Despite his national origin, however, Todorov has produced his entire body of philosophical work in France as a Western intellectual writing in French. His work has become available in his native Bulgaria relatively recently, and he would not be as widely recognized as a public intellectual in Bulgaria as he may be in France. Therefore, his positionality as a rhetor, when interpreting Bulgarian history, is ambiguous because he is both an insider and an outsider to Bulgarian society.

Todorov’s theoretical work is not oblivious to the question of positionality and its importance for the understanding of historical narratives. In The Morals of History (Todorov, 1995), he devotes particular attention to the position of the “exile” as a privileged speaker. He recalls the story of Thucydides, who sought to explain why he was qualified to write the history of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta by arguing that “although he was Athenian, he had ‘lived for twenty years far from his country,’ and that he had learned because of this exile, to know his own people, and others, better” (Todorov, 1995, p. 12).

Although there is wisdom in the words of Thucydides, Todorov (1999) is not really acting as a historian when presenting the survivor stories in Voices From the GULAG to a Western audience. Deyanova (2002) points out that many of Todorov’s books are not books of history but reflections on the meaning of history written from the point of view of “a concerned witness.” This observation points to an important
distinction between history and memory and the importance of the act of bearing witness in the interpretation of both. The question of Todorov’s rhetorical positionality becomes more complex if addressed in relation to the fluid, subjective, personally lived, and often incomplete narratives of memory.

The position of the exile may prove to be less useful in the discussion of memory because, as Halbwachs (1980) suggests, memory is preserved and sustained within the confines of communities of shared experience. Halbwachs’ notion of “affective communities” of memory has a particular bearing on understanding the reactions Todorov seeks to evoke in his audience. To a Western audience, the word *gulag* in the title of the book evokes an instant association with the Soviet gulags, most famously described by Solzhenitsyn (1974-1976) in *The Gulag Archipelago*. By contrast, the word *gulag* is rarely used in Bulgaria when referring to the labor camps. They are more commonly known simply as “the camps.” Indeed, the central survivor stories presented in the book were originally made public in a 1990 documentary by Bulgarian filmmaker Atanas Kiryakov titled *The Survivors: Camp Stories*, which was broadcast on Bulgarian National Television.

Following Halbwachs’s (1980) theory of collective memory, the Western audience of *Voices From the GULAG* constitutes an “affective community” quite different from a Bulgarian audience. The spatial marker of Lovech would not evoke any personal memories for most Westerners. Furthermore, the time period between 1959 and 1962, when the Lovech camp operated, would call forth personal experiences of a rather different character from those of a Bulgarian resident. Thus, for Western audiences to understand the stories of camp survivors, readers would have to incorporate these personal narratives into their own collective memories and weave them into their own narratives of communism. Here, the mythological narratives of the Cold War would come into play as well as other stories of the horrors of Stalinist gulags and Nazi concentration camps. As Schlesinger (1991) has noted,

> At its most simple, at least until the revolutions of 1989-90 in the former Communist bloc, the dominant world-picture was of a capitalist (democratic) West confronted by a socialist (totalitarian) East. Although by the time the Berlin Wall had collapsed it was widely conceded that state socialism was not in most places a regime of Stalinist terror, it was nonetheless still rightly seen as inherently repressive and authoritarian with violent origins that still continued to exert influence upon the policing of dissent. (pp. 9-10)

Against this backdrop, the stories of the six survivors in Todorov’s volume suddenly acquire a strangely predictable nature. Although the specifics of their suffering and pain are new and unsettling to the reader, the meaning of this suffering within the grand narrative of totalitarian horror and oppression is hardly unexpected. Moreover, this meaning reinforces another myth in the Western collective imaginary: the myth of the West’s “victory” over the “Soviet Evil Empire.”
Furthermore, the book’s title promises to educate readers about “life and death in communist Bulgaria,” but the text presents a very narrow slice of the realities of life and death in that country. The selective view deals mainly with the realities of the camps. Todorov (1999) justifies this move by presenting the camps as “an institutional cornerstone” (p. 17) and a metaphor for the way all of society worked. Nevertheless, although the depictions of life and death in the camps may evoke sympathy in Western audiences, they do little to inform them about life in communist Bulgaria as a whole.

In support of the latter point, consider a couple of readers’ reactions to *Voices From the GULAG*. Although this article cannot offer a comprehensive reception analysis, the two examples that follow have been selected because they illustrate the paradigmatic response of a Western audience to Todorov’s rhetoric. For instance, a reader’s review, posted on the bookselling Web site Amazon.com, states the following:

This book terrified me in its magnification of horrors and atrocities suffered by those in the Communist gulag. What evil was perpetrated on millions of innocent lives during this time. Read this book and you will never forget the gruesome images, the agonizing despair felt by the inmates of these bloody camps. Anyone who thinks that Communism and Socialism are beautiful ideologies should read the accounts of those who lived under such glorious regimes as Stalin and Hitler! (A Reader, 2003)

This reader extrapolates from the six inmate narratives in Todorov’s book about the lives of millions. In his or her mind, communism, socialism, and Nazism are simply different words for the same horrible machine of political oppression, and nearly everyone who lived under any of those regimes was a victim.

A second example is found in an academic review of *Voices From the GULAG*, which offers a more sophisticated and detailed analysis, yet its conclusions are strikingly similar. The review praises Todorov for providing historical context to less informed readers and situates the survivor narratives within a Western imaginary of totalitarianism:

The book is well-arranged for the reader who may have little acquaintance with 20th century Bulgarian history: a “Historical Summary” condenses events leading up to the country’s adoption into the Soviet bloc at the end of World War II and the subsequent institution of methods of terror which had been refined in the Soviet Union a decade before. As a collection of first-hand accounts, this book belongs to the massive library of works by victims of 20th century totalitarianism. (Galloway, 2001, p. 156)

In this scholar’s summary, as in the reader’s review above, the history of Bulgaria under communism is cleanly summarized and reconciled, and the camp survivors’ stories fit neatly in a static picture of catalogued suffering.

**Structural interventions.** The organization of *Voices From the GULAG* offers another key source of insight into the mechanisms used to transform the personal
narratives of inmates into a Western-centric rhetoric of conscience. Todorov has compiled the book using accounts that were first publicized through the mass media in Bulgaria and adding some new interview material. However, the book is not a mere transcript of media and interview texts. Rather, Todorov opens with a lengthy theoretical introduction that frames the accounts that follow. The introduction analyzes the nature of totalitarian society as an ideal type rather than its local specifics in Bulgaria.

Todorov introduces the narratives within a particular structural order. The survivors’ stories are presented in a section titled “The Inmates” and are broken up into thematic subsections, as follows: “The ‘Crimes,’” “Arrest and Deportation,” “Camp Life,” and “Life After the Camp.” The last subsection is titled “The Women’s Camp” and presents three women’s stories without interruption, although two of them are rather short and less detailed and refer to camps other than the one in Lovech, where the men’s stories originate. As a result of this organization, for the most part, the reader does not read a survivor’s story in its entirety, and it is easy to lose track of a single person’s life story while following the structural framework imposed by Todorov.

By imposing this structure onto the narratives, Todorov reframes them as illustrations of his claim that the concentration camp is a metonymical representation of the entire communist system. As he puts it, “the concentration camp is doubly emblematic of totalitarian regimes: it is both a part of the whole and an image of the whole” (Todorov, 1999, p. 17). Thus, as the book structure breaks up inmates’ narratives into thematically organized excerpts, it reconstitutes them as evidence in Todorov’s rhetoric of conscience. Ironically, in this act of reframing, the new structure takes away the personal and subjective character of the individual accounts. Although it may help readers to imagine the dehumanizing aspect of the camps, it does violence to survivors’ attempts to reclaim their subjectivity through the act of telling their personal stories.

In comparison to the fragmented presentation of survivor stories, the narratives of guards, political overseers, and administrators of the camps are presented in their entirety without interruptions in the second part of the book, titled “The Other Side.” The effect is to create an image of a horrible institution where the inmates lose their personality and identity and their tormentors stand starkly as lone individuals who must bear personal responsibility for the atrocities in the camps. Within this frame, the comments of the guards often appear disturbingly insensitive and even inhuman in their failure to acknowledge personal responsibility and continual references to authorities “above” that were making decisions and issuing orders.

Although this article does not advocate exemption from individual responsibility, it proposes that Todorov’s structural intervention is selective in that he does not examine the structures within which the actions of the tormentors were embedded. A similar critique has been directed at Todorov’s other work on concentration camps. He has grappled with camp realities on a wider scale in his book Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps (Todorov, 1996b). There, he examines the nature of Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags and offers a structuralist, psychoanalytical
interpretation of the moral universe of inmates and guards. In that effort, Todorov attempts to separate morality from political ideology to examine just the first. This conceptual separation is critiqued by Mazower (1999), who notes that the question of moral behavior in the “era of mass violence” is too often reduced to claims that “ideology is bad and morality is good, self-evident and existing outside history and politics.” He further suggests that

a more honest approach is to accept that, in the era of mass violence, people’s moral universe was often circumscribed by their ideological sympathies; to accept that for much of our century, if not today, moral decisions were saturated with political values. (Mazower, 1999)

In Todorov’s interpretation, however, the politics of moral decisions remain unexamined.

**Discussion: The Hermeneutics of Testimony**

The framing structure that Todorov creates in *Voices From the GULAG* carries specific consequences for his construction of a rhetoric of conscience. Its ultimate effect is a shift in genre from epideictic (display) to judicial (forensic) rhetoric. In their original form, the narratives of camp survivors may be viewed as display rhetoric; they are ceremonial in their attempt to reestablish the identity of the speakers as well as to build a communal memory of the past. They shame the torturers and praise the victims but do not seek to accuse or defend, nor do they invite specific action. Moral judgment by the audience is invoked but not demanded. By contrast, Todorov reduces survivor narratives to proofs, which he uses to construct a forensic rhetoric with a particular emphasis on the moral element of the desired judgment that allows him to present an appeal to conscience.

In support of this distinction, consider the statement of Nikolas Dafinov, one of the Lovech camp survivors. Dafinov offers an image of what may be a proper public response to the uncovered truth about the camps when he states that “a new and unprecedented Christian mass must be said for all the martyrs of the Communist concentration camps” (Todorov, 1999, p. 108). Dafinov further asserts that through the performance of this ritual and through the act of “broadcasting the truth” about the camps, “we’ll free ourselves from our fear and that God, in his infinite mercy, will save our Christian souls” (Todorov, 1999, p. 108). From this point of view, it is evident that the narratives of survivors come forth as epideictic proclamations rather than as judicial accusations.

Although not all of the survivor narratives make a call for a religious ceremony, nor do they all demonstrate faith in God, none of them discuss legal procedure as a remedy for past injustices. This, however, is the position that Todorov (1999) adopts.
Consider, for instance, the following statement from Todorov’s introduction, where he attempts to imagine a formal process of judging “totalitarian crimes committed under the former Communist regimes” (p. 31). In Todorov’s view, these crimes “bear more closely upon the collective conscience of the nation than upon the demands of justice” (p. 31). In other words, he seeks to invoke here the application of moral law rather than the formal laws of the judiciary. He writes:

I can readily imagine the creation of a special jury to which nationally respected individuals would be named and whose judgments would be broadcast to the entire nation. Empowered to establish the degrees of political responsibility, the jury would also pronounce sanctions affecting the honor, rather than the civil liberties, of those found guilty. (p. 31)

Setting aside the problem of implementing Todorov’s proposal in practice, it serves to illustrate the forensic inclinations of his rhetorical act.

To understand the significance of this transformation from one genre of discourse to another, Ricoeur’s (1980) theorization of the hermeneutics of testimony is instructive. Ricoeur asserts that testimony is associated with the conditions of a trial and that the mere “eyewitness” character of an account “never suffices to constitute its meaning as testimony” (p. 124).

One may ask, then, whether the accounts of camp survivors, as they originally appear in private contexts or in the mass media, can be construed as testimonies. One would have to posit the public sphere of the media as a juridical sphere to answer this question affirmatively. But the media public sphere does not meet the conditions of a trial that, as Ricoeur (1980) explains, involve “a legal action including charges and defense and calling for a judicial decision which settles a dispute between two or several parties” (p. 124). Thus, although the media may often be referred to as the “courtroom of public opinion,” accounts presented in the media do not necessarily constitute testimony.

Todorov, however, exploits what Ricoeur calls “an exchange between the juridical and the historical traits of testimony” (p. 125) to construct a rhetoric of conscience in which he uses the survivors’ accounts simply as proofs in his own act of giving testimony. He accomplishes this rhetorical feat through framing the narratives of the survivors in a new way. By exercising the privilege of framing, Todorov asserts the right to make truth claims before his audience and positions himself as a witness to communist political violence. Ricoeur has noted that Aristotle “has in mind, under the heading of ‘witnesses’ (martures) not narrators of things seen so much as moral authorities” (p. 127). Thus, following Ricoeur, it may be argued that Todorov positions himself as a witness in the Aristotelian sense of the term; he claims a role as a moral authority.

As an Aristotelian witness, Todorov is testifying to his belief in the moral corruption of a system that made possible the institution of camps, and he is doing so...
in the imaginary courtroom where the system of totalitarian communism is being judged. Moreover, the imaginary jury he is appealing to is not that of Bulgarians but of the Western readers of *Voices From the GULAG*. Todorov’s goal in presenting the stories of survivors is not simply to stir the emotions of his readers. Indeed, he is not satisfied with the display nature of the rhetoric of survivor narratives. Although he cautions against the literal use of memory, which may disintegrate into revenge, Todorov’s ultimate concern remains with justice. He insists that “by reflecting upon past injustices, we can draw lessons for the future and perhaps restore the very ideal of justice” (Todorov, 1999, p. 35). Herein lies the main problem with his argument. Although he appeals to an ideal of justice that asserts universality, Todorov’s rhetoric is directed toward a particular (i.e., Western) audience.

In sum, in Todorov’s rhetorical appropriation the narratives of camp survivors no longer address the collective memory of Bulgarians. They are no longer shocking, horrifying revelations of terrible deeds that were occurring while average Bulgarian citizens were trying to make a living and raise their children. They are no longer the desperate cries for a restoration of the victims’ dignity and identity but have, instead, become the confirmation of anticommunist mythology and a proclamation of the moral superiority of the West. Through Todorov’s rhetorical intervention, the internal drama of a society in transition is swallowed by the ideological grand narrative of a civilized, democratic West and a backward, totalitarian East. Ultimately, the narratives of camp survivors are employed in a renewed process of “inventing Eastern Europe” (Wolff, 1994) as the dark Other of the West.

**Conclusion: Whose Memory, Whose History?**

The central argument emerging from this discussion is that Todorov’s intervention posits the West as a morally superior collective agent, which is called on to accept responsibility for the future of postcommunist Eastern Europe. This interpretation is particularly problematic because of its apparent universal appeal delivered with the implied exclusion of Bulgarian audiences. Structured in this way, Todorov’s rhetorical intervention functions to deny a troubled and wounded Bulgarian nation the maturity and integrity to address the horrors of its own past and be the guardian of its own public memory and the author of its history.

Todorov (1999) concludes his introduction to *Voices From the GULAG* with the heart-wrenching story of a woman who was summoned by the police after her husband’s arrest only to return the next morning having lost her mind as a result of unknown tortures and humiliations she has experienced. He writes that though she is still alive, she will never recover. As with this mother still haunted by hallucinations, the population of half a continent suffers from physical and mental problems from which they may never be freed. Who will take care of them? (p. 35)
The tragic story of this mother becomes a metaphor for the state of all of Eastern Europe after communism. By ending his discussion with a focus on the mother’s weakness, Todorov denies her children their voice and the autonomy to confront the past.

By attempting to move survivors’ accounts from the realm of public memory further into the realm of history, Todorov fixes their meaning within existing configurations of power. As proofs in his rhetoric of conscience, survivors’ narratives speak to a long-standing transnational discourse of confrontation between capitalism and communism, democracy and totalitarianism. This move also changes the status of survivors as speakers. In their original communicative act, the inmates appear as epideictic orators who have reclaimed their personal identity through the act of telling their stories. Once their accounts have been appropriated into the realm of ideology, the survivors are once again depersonalized and deprived of the uniqueness of their individual traumatic experiences.

In conclusion, it is important to point to some implications this analysis carries for future studies of the rhetorics of political violence. The question of the West’s moral superiority transcends the legacy of communism and the ideological wars of the past century. Indeed, it is at the heart of current struggles to “win hearts and minds” in a new ideological War on Terror, which has replaced the Cold War. In analyzing the rhetorical strategies that emerge from this new historical situation, one challenge for intellectuals is to expose the “false universals” of ideology (Said, 2001) that demonize the Other and are too often used to excuse atrocity. In this task, it is critical to recognize the fragility of memory and to open up spaces within the public sphere where the voices of victims on all sides of the battle lines can be heard.

Notes

1. The book was originally released in France in 1992 under the name Au Nom Du Peuple: Témoignages Sur Les Camps Communistes (Ed. de l’Aube).
2. The word gulag is derived from the Russian acronym GULAG, which stands for Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps (Khlevniuk, 2004).
3. The Lovech camp was dubbed “Sunny Beach” by camp guards in an ironic reference to an elite Black Sea resort in Bulgaria. On detention, inmates were sometimes mockingly informed that they would be sent on vacation to Sunny Beach.
4. This ambivalent public response is not surprising given the history of exclusive hierarchies of privilege that permeated Bulgarian society under communism. One example of such exclusivity is associated with a segment of the population that was given the special designation of “active fighters against fascism and capitalism.” This title was given to people who had allegedly been engaged in political or guerilla combat activities in the years immediately before the 1944 communist ascension in Bulgaria. The families of the so-called “active fighters” were given special government pensions, priority admission to educational institutions, priority access to housing, and other forms of preferential treatment (Anguelov, 2002). Thus, the victims of communist repression, or the “repressed” as they came to be referred to publicly, were seen by some Bulgarians as “the new active fighters,” just one more group clamoring for privileged status on account of their past suffering.
5. Aristotelian rhetoric identifies three types of rhetoric — epideictic (display, demonstrative), judicial (forensic), and deliberative (Aristotle, 1991, 1.3). Epideictic rhetoric addresses audience members as
spectators to give praise or lay blame (1.9). By contrast, judicial rhetoric addresses the audience as a jury and takes the form of accusation or defense to establish the rightfulness or wrongfulness of a past action (1.10 to 1.15). Finally, deliberative rhetoric invites judgment about future actions and aims to exhort or dissuade the audience (1.4 to 1.8).

References


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