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Oral History (english version)

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Oral History (english version)

von Andrea Althaus, Linde Apel

1. Introduction

Oral histories are something we encounter almost everywhere, be it on television, the radio or the internet, in exhibitions, local history events, memorial contexts, classrooms, or projects investigating historical injustices.[1] Nowadays, trying to teach (and come to terms with) contemporary history *without* “eyewitnesses” would be almost inconceivable, especially in nonacademic contexts. With audiovisual interviews in which individuals describe past experiences and **historical events**, we can bring history to life and elicit greater public interest.

While oral history interviews may not be as omnipresent in university lecture halls and departmental specialties as they are in popular history contexts, their importance for historical research and teaching has nonetheless increased over the past forty years, with oral history narratives having proven to be particularly fruitful sources for today’s **cultural historians**. Oral histories let us shift the focus from larger systemic structures to the individual participants, with their **subjective** perceptions, experiences, interpretations of the world, behavioral patterns and modes of action. This broadening of perspectives makes the great multiplicity and complexity of historical realities readily apparent, thereby bolstering cultural history’s critique of attempts to recount “history” in the singular. And by seeking out individuals and communities that have left no written materials or have long been marginalized in historiography, we can also answer the call to include “ordinary people” and to write “history from below,” as propounded by *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life).[2]

Back when the cultural history turn was gathering strength, it caused an unease among certain historians, which also manifested as a great skepticism towards orally collected testimonies. As the literary scholar Alessandro Portelli remarked in 1979, oral history was haunting the halls of historical studies like a “specter.”[3] But nowadays, the life history interview is rarely rejected out of hand as a potential historical source. While it might now be used as a matter of course,[4] there are nonetheless differing views on what oral history actually *is*. A historical subdiscipline? A methodology? Just a category of source material? Or is it actually a research field in its own right? [5]

We will begin our explorations by defining the term, using this as a basis for elucidating the historical development of oral history before going on to outline its theoretical foundations and then describing its concrete practice. In the final section, we will look at the archiving, secondary analysis and digitization of interviews. The main focus here is on oral history in the context of

historical scholarship. Oral history in other applications, such as in senior care programs, schools, and the media, is often aimed at other goals, such as healing through storytelling or eliciting audience sympathies, which will not be discussed in depth here. Furthermore, our explorations will focus on the debates and developments (along with international influences) seen in West Germany and the reunified country.

Image



Oral History Association: „Photograph of a unidentified woman typing a transcription of an audio tape reel“. Photographer:in, date and place unknown.
Quelle: [University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library](#); crediting [UNT Libraries Special Collections](#) [20.03.2023]

2. What is Oral History?

Originating in the USA, the term “oral history” has since established itself in the German-speaking world as an untranslated English expression. In the early 1980s, Lutz Niethammer described the term as an “unfortunate and ambiguous, yet highly evocative phrase.”^[6] To him, translating this into German was problematic, because the literal translation “mündliche Geschichte,” or other labels like “diachronic interview” and “historical memory research,” only partially conveyed the idea of “oral history.” Therefore, he says, it is better to adopt the “name that has been historically elaborated elsewhere.”^[7] But what does this polyvalent, overarching term actually mean?

Oral history is first and foremost a methodological toolkit for asking questions about and recording historical experiences. The application of this technique results in source materials, namely audio or video recordings, upon the basis of which history can be written.^[8] Oral history is both a source material category and a research field in its own right. It is characterized by a particular understanding of history that starts with individual human beings and not with overarching structures. The historians Julia Obertreis and Anke Stephan put it succinctly: “Oral history is simultaneously a methodology, a type of source material, and an interdisciplinary research field.”^[9]

Inspired by diverse disciplines, including (historical) **anthropology**, sociology, psychology and literary studies,^[10] this research field is also practiced around the world.^[11] Its wide-ranging interdisciplinarity and internationality has inevitably led to differing emphases, along with diverse interpretations of what oral history is and should be. Furthermore, having been practiced for at least eighty years (in Germany about half that long), oral history has been as prone to historical shifts as any other research field.

For many oral history projects, one basic motivation has been the democratization of historiography. Lutz Niethammer, head of the first major German oral history project LUSIR (Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930–1960, or “Life stories and social culture in the Ruhr region, 1930–1960”), wrote in 1980 that “a democratic future needs a past in which not only the upper classes are heard.”^[12] The LUSIR project considered the interviewees to be equal partners. With oral history, the production of source materials would be “more cooperative” and the interpretation of history would be done with “more solidarity.”^[13] Even today, oral history is sometimes referred to as a “movement” towards democratizing the production and writing of history,^[14] pointing to its anchoring in West Germany’s “new social movements” of the 1980s.^[15]

In the struggle to democratize the writing of history, it is no accident that oral history in particular has taken on a key role, since it is uniquely capable of filling in the gaps in written sources that are often fragmentary and largely told from the perspective of the ruling class. Especially in the early years of oral history practice in West Germany, interviews were seen as “democratic

counternarratives from below” whose most important function was to critically question the⁵ von 35 dominant narrative, which was still heavily influenced by the Nazi regime’s production (and elimination) of source materials.[16] But it is not only in postdictatorial states that historians have harnessed oral history’s potential for actively generating source materials that can fill in gaps in the archival record.[17] In the USA, the oldest line of oral history has been primarily concerned with documenting the testimonies of political and economic elites – also as a way to fill in gaps in the sources and to shed more light on political decision-making processes.[18]

Regardless of whether interviewing elite individuals or “ordinary people,” every historian ties their work to a specific investigative focus. While this focus may be specific to a certain project or topical area, we can still identify certain trends and commonalities that are shared by different oral history projects. The lowest common denominator is that these interviews are aimed at uncovering details about what once was. Unlike the interview projects conducted by social scientists or cultural studies researchers, those done by historians are always centered on the past. And, according to Dorothee Wierling, historians cannot and should not be indifferent to “how the narrated remembrance relates to the past happening or experience.”[19]

How narratives, memories, events, “lived experiences” and “integrated experiences” (two terms that will be described below) are interrelated, and what value diachronic interviews have as historical sources,[20] are questions that have weighed on oral history since its inception. However, the answers to these questions have shifted over time. The initial hope of gathering factual historical information through interviews soon gave way to a realization that while life history narratives may not enable direct access to some “definitive” past, they are all the more valuable as source materials for analyzing the subjective interpretation, appropriation and processing of history.[21] In the beginning, interviewers tried to conduct interviews in such a way as to exert minimal influence on the testimony, ostensibly in order to ensure the production of historical evidence, but nowadays it has become accepted that oral history interviews are actually “narratives in conversation form.”[22] Dialogality, orality, subjectivity and narrativity, all once seen as weaknesses of diachronic interviews, are now seen as their strengths.[23] Today, the question is not only what the interviewee actually says, but also why they said it, and how, and to whom. But before we delve deeper oral history’s theoretical foundations and nuancing, let us take a brief look at its historical development.

3. On the History of Oral History

The oral tradition is one of humanity’s oldest cultural practices and has long shaped the writing of history. But with the professionalization of historical studies through the nineteenth century, oral narratives lost their significance to the point that the writing of history became reliant almost

exclusively on written source materials.[24] Although discussions of oral history often start with the oral traditions of ancient Greece and various African cultures, the development of “oral history” as it is understood in the West today – namely as one based on *recorded* interviews about the past – is a twentieth-century phenomenon. This is because its development depended on an important technological achievement: recording devices and storage media, once expensive, delicate and unwieldy, had now become affordable, sturdier and easier to use.

One early example of this is the use of magnetic-wire recording in 1946 by Chicago psychologist David P. Boder, who traveled to displaced-person camps across Europe to interview survivors of Nazi persecution. These interviews are the first known documents in which the voices of survivors of Nazi persecution are recorded for posterity in audible form.[25] The development of Holocaust oral history, which began with this early postwar project and gathered momentum in the 1970s,[26] greatly shaped how oral history is seen in general, especially among non-academics. Great prominence was achieved for example by the Shoah Foundation (founded by Steven Spielberg), which gathered over fifty thousand interviews with survivors of Nazi persecution, recorded from 1994 to 2000.[27] In Germany too, the 1990s saw numerous interviews with survivors of Nazi persecution, especially through the efforts of researchers from concentration camp memorial sites. This formed the basis for several publications that set new standards with their methodological considerations.[28]

But for the early days of oral history, the Holocaust – with the exception of the Boder project – did not yet play a major role. American oral history, which has been pioneering in many regards, can be roughly divided into two major streams. Firstly, there were interviews with the elites, as mentioned above. It is in this political history stream that we find the oldest oral history archive, the Columbia Center for Oral History Research, founded in 1948 by the historian and journalist Allan Nevins, who is often called the father of oral history.[29] In contrast to the situation in the German-speaking world, the conducting and collecting of interviews in the USA was primarily done by archives and libraries.[30] Secondly, US oral historians were also interested in communities that had produced hardly any written source materials thus far, and had not been protagonists in historiography, such as formerly enslaved people and indigenous tribes. The goal was – if not to give them their own voice – to at least let them be heard more.[31] This branch of oral history, which was influenced by **social history**, also emerged in the England of the 1970s, where it was closely tied to labor history. [32]

In non-academic terms, one particularly influential British development was the rise of “history workshops,” in which laypersons wrote local histories that were both critical and sympathetic. This new form of historiography was soon taken up in other countries, as seen for example in the history workshops of West Germany.[33] This interest in making visible the experiences and

narratives of previously ignored social groups, and in drawing our attention back to things that had been forgotten, was a central aspect of *Alltagsgeschichte*, which became established in the 1980s. [34] In West Germany, the development of oral history was closely tied to *Alltagsgeschichte*, as interviews were seen as particularly suited for recording the experiences and sensibilities of everyday life.[35]

In East Germany, oral history took a rather different trajectory. Historical **eyewitnesses** with politically acceptable testimonies became institutionally established and were much heard at schools, state-run enterprises and **memorial sites**. At the same time, it was nearly impossible to critically engage with their testimonies or to question them in any way, especially since state-regulated eyewitnesses themselves were heavily restricted by political controls.[36] In contrast, interviews about everyday life were undesirable, requiring an official application and approval first.[37] And while interviews were certainly a matter of course in the journalistic context, they did not necessarily result in life history narratives.

Furthermore, any interviews conducted still suffered from a hard economic reality: blank tape was hard to get. This meant that any interviews recorded still had to be deleted after transcription so that the tape could be used again.[38] Interviews also played an important role in East Germany's *Dokumentarliteratur* and *Protokollliteratur* ("documentary literature" and "transcript literature"), with the corresponding publications being widely read.[39] During the late 1980s, with the country's tentative steps towards political and social transformation, it became more and more possible to voice life stories outside of ideological constraints and political service.[40] The very particular political constellation of those years also enabled an interview project to be conducted by West German historians at several locations across East Germany shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall.[41]

In West Germany too, oral history gained a foothold much later than in the USA, the UK and other Western nations. It began with just a few historians who made this method known in West Germany during the late 1970s, inspired by their contacts with oral historians in other countries; this also points to the importance of personal cross-border networks for the development of oral history. Besides Lutz Niethammer, who traveled to the USA in 1975 specifically to familiarize himself with this research technique,[42] there was also the feminist historian Annemarie Tröger. She had learned about oral history in the early 1970s under the historian and civil rights activist Lawrence Goodwyn at Duke University in North Carolina. When she began her research work at West Berlin's Free University in 1976, she experimented with this technique and conducted one of Germany's first oral history projects.[43]

Annemarie Tröger was in close contact with various pioneers of oral history, including Paul Thompson in England, Laura Passerini in Italy, Ronald Grele in the USA, and Daniel and Isabelle

Bertaux-Wiame in France, and was on the advisory board at the *International Journal of Oral History*. Like Lutz Niethammer, she also took part in the international oral history conferences that have taken place around the world every two years since 1976, and from which the International Oral History Association (IOHA) officially emerged in 1996. These international exchanges were quite important for the early oral historians, especially in the face of the great skepticism and criticism they met at home—including in West Germany.^[44]

Image



Oral History Association (L to R): Sam Tan (University of the Philippines), Ronald J. Grele (colloquium chairman), Annemarie Tröger (Free University of Berlin) and Paul Thompson (University of Essex). Unknown photographer, ca. 1979–80. Source: University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library (accessed March 20, 2023)

The relatively late emergence of oral history in West Germany also had to do with the country's Nazi past. In denazification proceedings and postwar personal testimonies, memories of the Nazi period were often distorted by subconscious repression, apologist arguments and even outright

lies, causing West German historians to reject narrated memories for decades, as seemingly⁹ von 35 unreliable sources.[45] It was in 1979, with the *Geschichtswettbewerb des Bundespräsidenten* or “Federal President’s history competition,” that oral history and the history of the everyday received a strong boost when sympathetic historians began pushing for “the interviewing of contemporaries” as one possible tool for competition entries, and as a remedy against repressing and forgetting past experiences.[46]

It was during this period that Germany’s first major academic oral history undertaking took place: the aforementioned LUSIR project. Under the leadership of Lutz Niethammer, a new generation of young left-wing historians set out to interview workers in the industrial Ruhr region about their life stories. When asking about the Nazi period, the interviewers expected stories of resistance and oppression, but instead, they mostly heard narratives of consensus and conformity. This experience of interviewees overturning researchers’ preconceptions was called by Niethammer and his team the “anti-typecasting shock.” Historical grand narratives of “the working class,” of revolt and class struggle, fell apart in the face of these interviews, making space for other explanatory accounts: a history of apolitical life among workers and housewives who had adapted to the dictatorial system.[47]

Image



Cover of *“Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten”*: *Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern*, edited by Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato, vol. 3 of *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet* (Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz Verlag, 1985).

This project’s grappling with unexpected histories had a lasting impact on the direction of contemporary history research, not only in terms of content, exposing unknown continuities and ruptures in German history, but also in terms of methodology, offering fruitful new impulses for the ongoing development of oral history practices in Germany.^[48] LUSIR also had an impact on the later institutionalization of oral history in West Germany. Detlev Peukert, who had been involved with the project at the start, went on to found the Workshop of Memory (Werkstatt der Erinnerung) in 1990, when he was the head of what is now the Research Centre for Contemporary History in Hamburg.^[49]

Among the oral history centers and archives in Germany, the Workshop of Memory is one of the oldest and largest; another is the German Memory Archive (Archiv Deutsches Gedächtnis, at the University of Hagen’s Institute for History and Biography), founded in 1993 by Alexander von Plato, another former team member of the LUSIR project. With connections around the world through the

IOHA, he and his team have been shaping the discussion of oral history and its methodologies for decades, including through their publication of the journal *BIOS*.^{11 von 35}[50] Alexander von Plato also participated in interviews conducted under rather adventurous conditions in East Germany shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall.[51] Today, there are several places holding a great many interviews about life in East Germany and the personal experience of its final upheavals.[52]

The institutions mentioned here, along with others from across the German-speaking world, maintain frequent contact with each other and are also members of an oral history network that was founded in 2014.[53] Furthermore, they are collaborating on the building of a unified online archive at Oral-History.Digital.[54] Recent years have seen more and more domestic cooperative projects emerging in addition to the field's broader international exchanges, such as those cultivated through lively discussions at IOHA conferences and through the Oral History Network of the European Social Science History Conference. There is always a great deal to discuss, due the great complexity of oral narratives as a source material.

4. Theoretical Foundations and Dimensions of Interview Analysis

In the ideal model of an oral history interview, a person exists at a particular biographical moment in their life within a historically specific present and recalls—with a view towards an anticipated future – their experiences of the past. The person tells of their own experiences and those of others, expresses opinions and interpretations of the self and the world, and links the individual episodes through **narrative** means into a coherent whole. This does not happen in a vacuum but in the physical presence of another person, who is in turn a biographically, socially and culturally anchored being. Through their shared conversation, stories about the past are formulated and images of the self are negotiated, both interactively and performatively.

Furthermore, the things that can be heard and seen on the recording go far beyond the actual words. Equally meaningful are the tones of voice, speech rhythms, pauses, nonverbal vocalizations, gestures, facial expressions, and so on. In short, oral history interviews feature an overlapping of different time layers (past, present and future) and an inextricable mixing of the individual with the social. The remembered experiences are narratively constructed and represent the visible/audible expression of a communicative relationship. On top of that, aspects of personal identity are also being formed and negotiated through the life history narrative. In order to avoid a hasty equivalence between narrated account and **historical incident**, or between an individual's remark and an unchanging identity, oral historians began to search early on for theoretical underpinnings that would help them better understand the resulting source materials. To do so, they often borrowed from adjacent disciplines.[55]

In looking to comprehend the complex interplay between the time of speaking and the time being spoken about, as well as the relationship between the individual and the collective, oral historians have taken frequent inspiration since the early 1990s from **theories of memory** developed by cultural studies and the social sciences. Here, the core insight is that memories are socially and culturally conditioned, and thus changeable. As individuals move through different social environments, their memories change accordingly, along with their images and conceptions of the past.^[56] Remembered details recounted in oral history interviews are therefore socially shaped communicative constructions.

Not only are memories both individual and collective, they are also both backward-looking and forward-looking. In the recounting, the interviewee draws a connection between the selves of the present, past and future. In doing so, the individual constructs a self that is always recognized as “me” despite any physical (or nonphysical) changes over time. The fact that narrative coherence is sometimes lacking cannot be explored here in depth, but only briefly mentioned. Traumatic experiences in particular can be hard to integrate into the narrative, resulting in interviews with discontinuities, gaps and fragmentation.^[57] This calling up of the past in the present—beyond its function in forming identity—also serves to temporalize subjective realities.^[58]

The sequencing of events as constructed in an oral history interview always reflects a narrative structure. Narration can be seen as the main linguistic method for the temporal organization of experiences. According to the classical Aristotelian definition, narratives have a structure of beginning, middle and end within which the sequence of events unfolds.^[59] The field of narratology can thus provide interesting theoretical insights for oral history. For example, there is analytical potential in the idea that the act of narration gives meaning to what has been experienced. This makes life-history interviews excellent source materials for looking at how individuals explain their world to themselves and endow historical events with meaning. In doing so, oral history interviews not only semanticize the past, but also restructure, aestheticize and fictionalize it. Narrators make use of their culture’s plot paradigms and fill gaps in the chain of events with creative imagination. They place their remembered experiences into a newly created temporal sequence while deciding which life episodes they want to present and which they do not.

Nonetheless, life history narratives are generally not substantially fictionalized, let alone pure fiction.^[60] Unlike literary texts, they *do* claim to address real experiences. They could be described as “reality narratives” that are both historically based *and* constructive in nature.^[61] This is why oral historians need to go beyond the *what* of a narration’s content in order to also consider the *how* of its telling, in terms of form, language, narrative structure and personal interactions.

However, the process of historical analysis cannot be satisfied with just looking at a narrative’s internal workings. For historians, it is also important to track down references outside the text, and

to ask how the narrated experience relates to the lived one, and to what extent this is historiographically relevant. For this, it is helpful to take a closer look at the idea of *Erfahrung* or “integrated experience.” According to Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, an integrated experience can be defined as an *Erlebnis* or “lived experience” that has been interpreted by the self. A lived experience becomes an integrated one when an individual deals with it internally, placing it in an interpretive framework alongside other integrated experiences. Besides these personally lived experiences, other reference points for the interview include socially mediated explanatory accounts such as films and other cultural artifacts.[62] As noted by Ulrike Jureit, an oral history interview can thus be seen as a “synthesis of experiences” in that it is both individual and collective and also interweaves the “today” with the “back then.”[63]

While it is not possible to analytically disentangle the temporal layering of this experiential synthesis, we can say that today’s presentations of the past always point back to experiences and discourses that are not rooted in the present.[64] But these experiences and discourses never exist as unchanged objects and are accessible only within a subjective framework of appropriation and interpretation, colored by integrated experience. And this is precisely where the real strengths of the oral interview lie. According to Alexander von Plato, if we understand oral history as an “Erfahrungswissenschaft” or “science of integrated experiences,” then this allows us to investigate “the *processing* of history and the *aftereffects* of past experiences on present-day attitudes and behaviors.”[65]

To write oral history as a history of personal experiences and interpretations, it is necessary to contextualize each audio/video narrative within its biographical, conversational and historical frameworks. While the biographical specificities and production situation can be analyzed on the level of the individual interview, pinpointing its historical references requires a comparison with other sources (such as personal documents, newspaper articles, archival materials, etc.). The primary aim of such a comparison is not to check the truthfulness of a life history narrative, but to map out its individuality and subjectivity.[66] In order to better understand *how* subjective meaning is constructed, oral historians have been increasingly investigating narrative structures for some time now.[67] This is because, as described above, oral history interviews present experiences to us *only* as narratives.

Another analytical approach that was propounded decades ago, but which is rarely pursued in a systematic way, is to also utilize the sense of hearing. After all, oral histories are *spoken* sources, and thus ones to be heard.[68] The oral aspects in particular, such as tone of voice, dialectical usages, intonation and nonlinguistic utterances, are significant carriers of meaning. In the case of video interviews, the same applies to physical expressions and demeanor.[69] Since these cannot be adequately transcribed (no matter how sophisticated the transcription system), it is the

recording itself that represents the actual source.[70] This is why we strongly advocate a close^{14 von 35} viewing and listening. Especially with emotional undertones and conversational dynamics, it is much easier to see/hear these things than to read them. The relationship between the interview's participants has a decisive impact on the shaping of the life history narrative, as has now become general knowledge among historians. According to the widely held consensus, every interview must be seen as a cooperative endeavor. The "creative role" of the interviewer thus also needs to be taken into account, as well as the evolving – and possibly reversing – relationship and power dynamics between the conversation partners over time.[71]

For many years now, the practice of oral history has been accompanied by questions about who gets to shape the interview and determine its interpretation. Even as early as the LUSIR project, with its intention that the interviewees act as the empowered subjects of their own stories, there were attempts at a collaborative historiography. However, the writing of history "from below," i.e. in collaboration with the historical actors, proved to be extremely difficult: according to Lutz Niethammer, it was simply not possible to resolve the tensions between the interviewees' interpretations and those of historians.[72] In the end, it was generally the interviewer who ultimately got the last word in the scholarly practice of oral history, in terms of analysis, interpretation and publication.[73]

It was with the concept of "shared authority" that the push for more collaborative approaches picked up again in the 1990s. This term was put forward by American oral historian Michael Frisch, who applied it mainly to the communicative level during the interview situation and to the subsequent editing of the transcript.[74] The idea of sharing control and authorship has been taken up many times since then, and with even greater collaborative involvement.[75] But for a long time, egalitarian cooperative research, with interviewees involved from the initial planning stage to the final analysis phase, was done mostly in the context of more activist-inspired projects, which sought to empower marginalized groups by amplifying their voices.[76]

The sharing of authority remains relatively unproblematic as long as the project participants do not develop conflicting interpretations. However, historians should not relinquish their intellectual control if historical revisionist, antidemocratic, racist, misogynist or similar interpretations are being inserted into the writing of history. Furthermore, we cannot sacrifice the core values of the historian's work, which include the balanced consideration of different voices and perspectives as well as the "veto power of the sources" (Reinhart Koselleck). The limits of a shared authority must therefore be constantly kept in mind and openly stated.

Today, projects based on collaborative history production, whereby interviewers and interviewees work together on an equal footing and present a shared result, are becoming more common in academia as well.[77] These are often projects in which interviews and other source materials are

collected through common effort. More recent research endeavors, especially those concerning^{15 von 35} exile, migration and postcolonial issues, point to new forms of cooperation that go far beyond traditional understandings of historical research.[78] But projects that strive towards a more open participation in source production and/or interpretation also need to carefully consider what they are promising to the participants. Maintaining the basic principles of research ethics, as formulated by Almut Leh some twenty years ago, is all the more important here. In particular, the form and limits of the collaborative framework, along with the levels of control, need to be communicated transparently.[79] Such projects offer a great opportunity for honing the concept of shared authorship and authority, for example in the context of participative research endeavors; after all, new theoretical insights in oral history always come from its real-world practice.[80]

Image



Interview situation during the Inclusive Digital Memory Archive (Inklusives Digitales Erinnerungsarchiv, or IDEA) project, Freiburg 2020/21. Photo: IDEA © <https://heridea.de/> (accessed March 20, 2023)

5. Doing Oral History: Practical Field Tips for Conducting Interviews

Oral history is a research practice characterized by differing regional approaches, diverse

interdisciplinary influences and great methodological variation. There are no fixed rules on how to conduct an oral history interview. Between the desire to interview as efficiently as possible (for example under time pressure) and as productively as possible (for example to build up an archive), it is the biographical narrative method that has proven most worthwhile. The narrative interview allows the interviewee to convey what is most important to them while also allowing the interviewer to pursue specific research questions. Influenced by sociology's biographical research work as well as the tradition of folklore studies, this method has been broadened through many years of experience by historians.[81] Regardless of whether the focus is on a narrowly defined situation or on drawing out a more comprehensive narrative about the interviewee's life story, it is important for the interviewer to encourage a free narrative.[82] Oral history interviews thus arise from the active interest of a questioning person whose most important skill should be attentive listening.[83]

Ideally, the narrative interview begins with a question that is open-ended in terms of time and scope, which elicits a narrative response. As much as possible, this opening narrative should remain uninterrupted by questions. When the interviewee signals the end of their report, the interviewer then asks subsequent questions intended to generate further narratives, as a way to better understand and deepen what has been said so far. Finally come the questions relating to aspects that have not yet been addressed, and that relate to the research project's specific focus. [84] At every stage of the interview, there have to be moments where the interviewer stays silent for a while, in order to actively listen and give the interviewee a chance to say whatever is important to them.

It is in the German-speaking world that the method of the life history narrative has become particularly popular. But here too, we can also profit from the English-speaking world's insights into the conducting of interviews, with tips that are both pragmatic and wide-ranging, and that span from the preparatory phase to the final analysis.[85]

The preparatory phase includes the question of who should be interviewed and why, so that the project's intentions can be openly and definitively communicated to the respondent. While advance research into the interviewee and the historic event's context are essential, this should not be used to constrict the narratives during the interview itself. Getting familiar with the recording equipment before the interview is just as important as settling the question of where and how the interviews are to be archived after the project is finished. To allow for long-term archival preservation, the recording should be of high quality. It is also important to prepare a release form that outlines the relevant usage rights and privacy protections.[86]

It is helpful to keep a research diary during every phase of the interview process, from preparation and implementation to postproduction and evaluation.[87] Information about the interview's

genesis and implementation is indispensable not only for one's own evaluation process, but also^{17 von 35} for a secondary analysis by other scholars. While having a transcription is helpful, it is no substitute for viewing or listening to the recording, because, as stated above, this is the actual source material. Last but not least, research ethics must also be kept in mind. This is because interviews are sensitive materials containing personal data, thus requiring extra protection. One must therefore be transparent in informing the interviewee about the reason and goal behind the interview, as well as its future archiving and potential uses. They should also have a chance to inspect the interview after it is done, with the possibility of restricting access to particular passages.[88]

6. Archiving, Secondary Analysis and Digitization

For a long time, interviews were seen as the private property of the interviewer, and after the project's completion, have rarely been made available as source materials for other researchers. There were often good reasons for this reluctance: insufficient resources for a proper archiving, issues left unresolved, missing release forms and poor-quality recordings, in addition to the interviewer's own potential desire to avoid outside scrutiny. This problem was further exacerbated by unclear or nonexistent guidelines for the archiving of interviews. All this led to a serious and practical consequence: these oral source materials could not be called up for inspection.

On the other hand, there were also early examples of interviews being placed in archives and made available for use beyond the original interview project, although the source materials might not have always fulfilled today's methodological expectations. In many cases, it was only transcripts of interviews that were archived. This applies to a collection assembled during the early days of Munich's Institute for Contemporary History, the "Zeugenschrifttum" (literally "witness writings"), whose very name pushes orality into the background.[89]

Similarly, at the Research Center for Hamburg's History from 1933 to 1945 (later the Research Centre for Contemporary History in Hamburg), the archives hold only transcripts of the interviews conducted in 1949 with various functionaries and several victims of the Nazi regime.[90] There are also a few early examples of state archives collecting interviews as well. One is the Hüttenberger Collection at the State Archive of North Rhine-Westphalia, comprising 155 conversations with civil servants and politicians during the 1960s and 70s.[91] The early 1990s saw the creation of archives specifically dedicated to interviews, such as the Workshop of Memory (Werkstatt der Erinnerung, 1990, part of the Research Centre for Contemporary History in Hamburg), which began mostly with the voices of individuals persecuted by the Nazis, as well as the German Memory Archive (Archiv deutsches Gedächtnis, 1993), which took in the interviews from the LUSIR project. Meanwhile, the more narrowly focused Archive of Memory (Archiv der Erinnerung, 1995–98) comprises video

interviews with Holocaust survivors living in Berlin and Brandenburg. Since 1990, the Documentation Center and Museum on Migration in Germany (Dokumentationszentrum und Museum über die Migration nach Deutschland) has also been collecting personal accounts, including interviews.

The names of these variously conceived institutions are clear reflections of their historical focus and commemorative priorities. Interviews were conducted with historiographically marginalized persons while previously collected materials were professionally archived and made accessible for subsequent research purposes. With the increasing distance to the events of the Nazi period and the resulting medialization of the **eyewitnesses**, people began discovering archived interviews as a resource for educational efforts, museums and other cultural products such as films. In the new millennium, it is digitally accessible interview collections that have become increasingly important. For example, the Center for Digital Systems at Berlin's Free University has been providing access since 2006 to interviews addressing Nazism, the Holocaust and other contemporary history topics.

[92]

For a long time, there was little theoretical reflection on how interviews are archived and utilized. As is so often the case, it was first in the English-speaking world that we saw debates concerning the significance and consequences of reusing oral history source materials.[93] Joanna Bornat, for example, gave a concrete example of the ethical problems stemming from secondary analysis: Is it okay to take interviews on the topic of housework and examine them for racist content if the female interviewees may not have consented to this particular area of inquiry?[94] One potential solution would be a release form that permits scholarly investigation beyond the original project; another would be an anonymization of the sources. With the increasing attention paid to oral history, the German-speaking world has also seen a growing interest in archived interviews, thereby putting the spotlight on secondary analysis as a new research strategy needing further deliberation in terms of inquiry focus, methodology and research ethics.[95]

Here, secondary analysis is to be understood as the analysis of interviews conceived of and conducted by others, where the original production framework and investigative interests may not match one's own. One trailblazing discussion of this was presented by the sociologist Brigitte Halbmayr, using the example of interviews conducted with female survivors of Mauthausen Concentration Camp.[96] Meanwhile, debates concerning a seeming disappearance of voices about the Nazi era and its aftermath inspired historians Julia Paulus and Matthias Frese, with their regionally focused project on wartime and post-war societies in the period 1938–48, to reflect on the secondary use of archived interviews.[97]

There have also been many discussions about how historians should deal with the huge number of interviews collected so far, what experiences they have had in this regard, and what conditions

need to be met before interviews can be used (in a critically aware manner) by outside parties.^{19 von 35} Here, Almut Leh underlines some basic preconditions: the interviews need to be properly archived and catalogued so that they can be researched, and they need to be viewable by researchers and known to them.[98]

Furthermore, when an oral source is to be archived, there is the question of what it will consist of. In addition to the recording, the interview material should ideally include a transcript as well, alongside a release form in which the participants specify the recording's permitted uses. If possible, there should also be information about the original production framework, which can help with contextualizing the interview.[99] This might include supplementary notes, for example on different existing formats (e.g. an original tape or a digitized copy) or transcript versions (e.g. whether edited, corrected, anonymized, etc.).

Notwithstanding various lesser pitfalls, secondary analysis does offer a great deal of potential. Narrative interviews can be extremely rich sources. Oral history archives, well-established for a good many years now, have reduced the barriers to interview analysis endeavors. But like any other historical source material, they also need to be scrutinized through the lens of source criticism. Here, several aspects differentiating interviews from other source materials have to be kept in mind.[100] These relate above all to the interview situation's particular dynamics, in which an intense interaction occurs between interviewer and interviewee at a particular moment in time, producing a dynamic constellation that can be difficult for outsiders to grasp. What at first glance might seem to be unprofessional behavior by the interviewer needs to be carefully contextualized. For example, it is important to recognize the state of scholarship back then and the potential limits to what could openly be said; these also need to be accounted for in the analysis. This is how secondary analysis is broadening the spotlight to include the interviewers, mostly ignored until now, with their own investigative interests, styles of communication and ways of seeing the world. [101]

The use of interviews for secondary analysis in other topical contexts and disciplines has been strongly affected by accelerating processes of digitization.[102] Analog recordings on outdated storage media – from magnetic tape to MiniDisc – had long been inaccessible for later users, due to reasons of conservation and/or practicality. These interviews have now been largely digitized, which not only enables their easy availability, but also means that these audio/video recordings can now get the analytical attention they deserve. This accessibility is further enhanced through online portals. Countless interviews are now available with just a few clicks and can be pieced together from widely scattered collections into new research samples. Data analysis tools like ATLAS.ti and MAXQDA are making it easier than ever to analyze interviews in bulk. There are currently experiments on also using AI to analyze large corpora.[103] Digitization's revolutionary

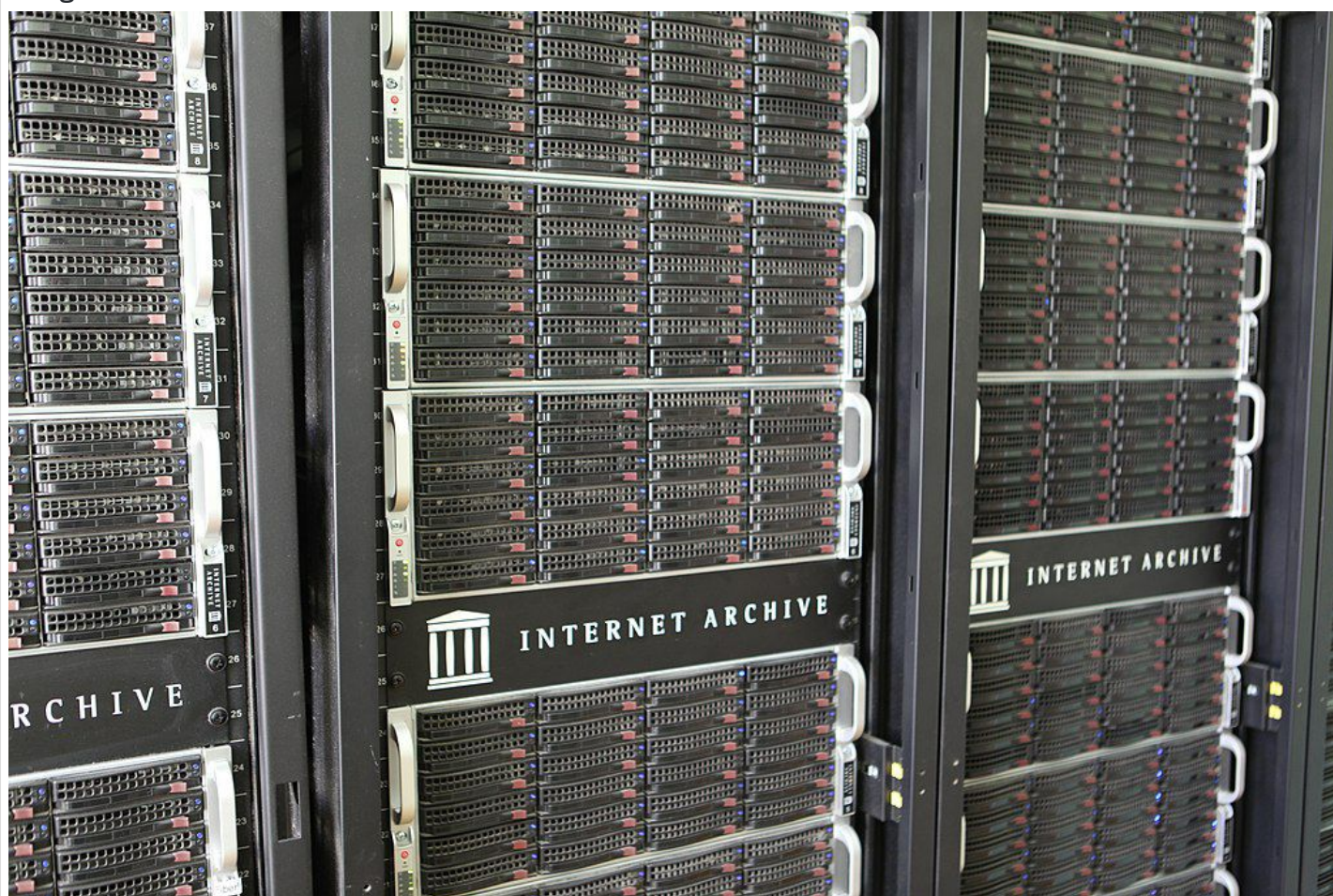
potential underlines once again how the development of oral history practice is strongly shaped by technology and media. Since its beginnings, it has always shifted according to new trends and possibilities in terms of recording, storage and dissemination.[104]

Archival practices are similarly shaped by digital innovations. The aforementioned online portal Oral-History.Digital, a cooperative project currently under construction, helps repositories and researchers with the archiving, cataloging and digital dissemination of collected interviews, thereby setting new standards in this area.[105] As time goes on – and this is anything but a shortcoming – archived interviews will lose their status as source materials for the writing of “contemporary” history. Furthermore, when treated as important and preservation-worthy “research data” – itself a concept that has played only a minor role until now in the hermeneutically oriented humanities – these archived interviews can come into question not only for historical researchers, but also for those in other fields of inquiry.

The current great interest in interviews will be further supported by a planned nationwide research data infrastructure for Germany, which is motivated by both scholarly and economic arguments. [106] The turning of narrative life-history interviews into audiovisual research data, now much easier to call up through digital infrastructures, presents both advantages and disadvantages. Easier availability with savings in both time and money is one advantage; improved collaboration in terms of shared access and discussion is another. This also makes it easier to combine different interview collections and to analyze these with a new investigative lens. But, among the concomitant challenges, there is the potential question of what it could mean if samples of almost unlimited size can now be assembled. Does easier access to large numbers of preexisting interviews make it harder to limit the number of sources included? Will the increasing ease of software-assisted analysis lead to a greater emphasis on quantitative analysis? There are many questions about source criticism in the digital age that have yet to be resolved.

From a research perspective, we need to ask what this standardized digital corpus, nearly limitless in size, will do to the interview as a unique and “unruly” source material. Will it be robbed of its potential for vexing and contradicting the accepted narratives of the past? Will a bulk analysis of interview data necessarily result in an unacceptable decontextualization of “wayward” narratives, erasing their specificities in terms of history, biography, conversational situation and audible/visible characteristics? An oral history practice that accounts for all these contextual details can be very fruitful, but it also means a lot of work. Fortunately, there are many who remain undeterred and are committed to working with a method that demands a certain “extra” from the researcher, in terms of theoretical reflection, social dexterity, and – that rarest of commodities – time.

Image



Server of the Internet Archive in San Francisco. Photographer: Jason Scott, 2013. Source: Flickr. License: CC BY 2.0 (accessed March 20, 2023)

7. Looking Ahead

Oral history has long since arrived in the mainstream of the historical sciences. What was formerly viewed with skepticism, a method whose proponents were taken only somewhat seriously by other scholars, has now become a vital and integral component of contemporary history research. Where it was once difficult to argue for the use of oral sources, the opposite can sometimes hold true today. Nowadays, if a contemporary history research project ignores the voices of those who were there, it is asking for criticism. According to the new imperative: if **eyewitnesses** are available, they have to be interviewed. While a welcome development, there are also risks here – especially if there is only a passing awareness of the decades of developments in oral history, with its many refinements and insights in both theory and methodology.

As both a method and a research field in its own right, oral history ultimately remains very time-consuming and can be meaningfully applied only if the investigation aims above all at the interviewees' own interpretations of the self, the world and the past, and/or at analyzing their

experiences. Understood as a particular way of seeing and approaching history, it allows us to^{22 von 35} leverage oral sources in researching the most diverse array of subject matters, going far beyond “traditional” oral history topics (for example, the Nazi period or the everyday history of “ordinary people,” as frequently studied in Germany). The occasionally highlighted fears that later **generations**, whose life experiences are marked more by prosperity and progress than by **dictatorship** and violence, might have nothing historiographically significant to recount, can be quickly dispelled^[107] – quite apart from the fact that experiences of war, violence and pandemics are certainly not restricted to the first half of the twentieth century. Current topics being intensively researched today through oral history include **migration history** and **postcolonial studies**, as well as the histories of **gender** and sexuality. Similarly important in the current practice of historical research are projects examining historical injustices like the abuse experienced in Catholic and Protestant church settings, at residential schools and in other situations of coercive “care.”

After decades of archival accumulation, the temporal horizons are also shifting: even if the eyewitnesses themselves have died, their narratives still remain available to us. This means that oral history research can also be practiced beyond the epoch of the currently living. And for some time now, the field of oral history has been also **historicizing** itself in an inspiring way.^[108] With the reappraisal of archived interviews, more scrutiny has been turning to the interviewers themselves. Their questions, their investigative interests and their conversational comments are being analyzed within their historiographic context, which also helps us write a history of science and a history of knowledge for the field of oral history. The outlook for the future of oral history is therefore quite encouraging, with its methodological and topical diversity ensuring that it remains a lively and disputatious research field.

Translated from German by Wayne Yung.

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[1] For their very helpful feedback, we would like to thank the Docupedia team, the anonymous reviewers and our colloquium colleagues at the Research Centre for Contemporary History in Hamburg.

- [2] See Ute Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte: Theorien, Praxis, Schlüsselwörter*, 4th ed.²³ von 35 (Frankfurt: 2004, first published 2001), 306–7.
- [3] Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 3rd ed. (Abingdon: 2016, first published 1998), 48–57, here 49; in the German context, a critical view was found for example in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Alltagsgeschichte: Königsweg zu neuen Ufern oder Irrgarten der Illusionen?” in *Aus der Geschichte lernen? Essays*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Munich: 1987), 130–51.
- [4] See for example Benno Gammerl, *Anders fühlen: Schwules und lesbisches Leben in der Bundesrepublik; Eine Emotionsgeschichte* (Munich: 2021); Grit Lemke, *Kinder von Hoy: Freiheit, Glück und Terror* (Berlin: 2021); Christina von Hodenberg, *Das andere Achtundsechzig: Gesellschaftsgeschichte einer Revolte* (Munich: 2018).
- [5] See Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: 2010), 2–3. For a discussion of this question during the early days of German oral history, see Alexander C.T. Geppert, “Forschungstechnik oder historische Disziplin? Methodische Probleme der Oral History,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 45, no. 5 (1994), 303–23, available online at https://www.academia.edu/326617/Forschungstechnik_oder_historische_Disziplin_Methodische_Probleme_der_Oral_History, accessed March 20, 2023.
- [6] Lutz Niethammer, introduction to *Lebenserfahrung und kollektives Gedächtnis: Die Praxis der “Oral History”*, ed. Lutz Niethammer (Frankfurt: 1985, first published 1980), 7–33, here 26.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 27; similarly Herwart Vorländer, “Mündliches Erfragen von Geschichte,” in *Oral History: Mündlich erfragte Geschichte*, ed. Herwart Vorländer (Göttingen: 1990), 7–28, here 7. On the North American terminological debate, see Alexander Freund, Kristina R. Llewellyn, and Nolan Reilly, introduction to *The Canadian Oral History Reader*, eds. Alexander Freund, Kristina R. Llewellyn, and Nolan Reilly (Montreal: 2015), 3–24, here 7; Louis M. Starr, “Oral History in den USA: Probleme und Perspektiven,” in Niethammer, *Lebenserfahrung*, 37–74.
- [8] On the importance of the original recording, see Andrea Althaus, Linde Apel, Lina Nikou, and Janine Schemmer, “Ein Interview, zwei Gesprächspartner, drei Fragehorizonte, vier Mithörerinnen: Deutungsmöglichkeiten einer archivierten Audioaufnahme,” in *Erinnern, erzählen, Geschichte schreiben: Oral History im 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Linde Apel (Berlin: 2022), 81–117, available online at https://www.zeitgeschichte-hamburg.de/contao/files/fzh/pdf/apel_erinnern_ebook_offen.pdf, accessed March 20, 2023.
- [9] Julia Obertreis and Anke Stephan, “Erinnerung, Identität und ‘Fakten’: Die Methodik der Oral History und die Erforschung (post)sozialistischer Gesellschaften,” in *Erinnerungen nach der Wende:*

Oral History und (post)sozialistische Gesellschaften, eds. Julia Obertreis and Anke Stephan (Essen: 2009), 9–36, here 9. 24 von 35

[10] On oral history's interdisciplinary context, see Ulrike Jureit, *Erinnerungsmuster: Zur Methodik lebensgeschichtlicher Interviews mit Überlebenden der Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager* (Hamburg: 1999).

[11] On oral history's international development, as well as its various cultural forms and influences outside of the industrialized West, see Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th ed. (New York: 2017, first published 1978), 52–108.

[12] Niethammer, introduction, 7; see also Ulrike Jureit, "Die Entdeckung des Zeitzeugen: Faschismus- und Nachkriegserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet," in *50 Klassiker der Zeitgeschichte*, eds. Jürgen Danyel, Jan-Holger Kirsch, and Martin Sabrow (Göttingen: 2007), 174–77.

[13] Franka Maubach, "'Mehr Geschichte wagen!' LUSIR und die ganze Geschichte der Arbeiter im Ruhrgebiet vor, während und nach dem Nationalsozialismus," *Sprache und Literatur* 47, no. 1 (2018), 29–57, available online at https://brill.com/view/journals/sul/47/1/article-p29_29.xml?language=de, accessed March 20, 2023; see also Lutz Niethammer, ed., *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930-1960*, 3 vols. (Bonn: 1983–85).

[14] See for example Freund, Llewellyn, and Reilly, introduction, 3.

[15] See Adelheid von Saldern, "'Schwere Geburten': Neue Forschungsrichtungen in der bundesrepublikanischen Geschichtswissenschaft (1960–2000)," *WerkstattGeschichte* 40, no. 2 (2005), 5–30.

[16] See Martin Sabrow, "Der Zeitzeuge als Wanderer zwischen zwei Welten," in *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, eds. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Göttingen: 2012), 13–32, here 21–22. Not every interview project pursued this critical view, as shown by Maik Ullmann, *Oral History von rechts: Einstige Eliten der "Stadt des KdF-Wagens" im Gespräch mit Bernhard Gericke* (Hannover: 2022).

[17] On the significance of oral history in post-socialist states, see Obertreis and Stephan, *Erinnerungen*.

[18] See Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 3rd ed. (New York: 2015, first published 1994); on the development of American oral history and the effect of archives frequently relying on private financial support, see Lutz Niethammer, "Oral History in USA: Zur Entwicklung und Problematik diachroner Befragungen," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 18 (1978), 457–501, here 465–66, available online at <https://library.fes.de/afs/pdf/afs-1978-457.pdf>, accessed March 3, 2023.

[19] Dorothee Wierling, "Oral History," in *Neue Themen und Methoden der Geschichtswissenschaft* (vol. 7 of *Aufriß der Historischen Wissenschaften*), ed. Michael Maurer (Stuttgart: 2003), 81–151, here 87.

[20] For a more detailed look, see Andrea Althaus, *Vom Glück in der Schweiz? Weibliche Arbeitsmigration aus Deutschland und Österreich (1920–1965)* (Frankfurt: 2017), 35–51.

[21] See Roswitha Breckner, "Von den 'Zeitzeugen' zu den 'Biographen': Methoden der Erhebung und Auswertung lebensgeschichtlicher Interviews," in *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte*, ed. Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt (Münster: 1994), 199–222.

[22] Ronald J. Grele, "Ziellose Bewegung: Methodologische und theoretische Probleme der Oral History," in Niethammer, *Lebenserfahrung*, 195–220, here 205.

[23] Portelli, "What Makes"; on the shift from a facts-oriented oral history to an interpretation-focused one, see Abrams, *Oral*, 5; see also Harald Welzer, "Das Interview als Artefakt: Zur Kritik der Zeitzeugenforschung," *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 13, no. 1 (2000), 51–63.

[24] See Thompson and Bornat, *The Voice*, 23–50.

[25] These interviews are available online at <https://voices.library.iit.edu>, accessed March 20, 2023; see also Daniel Schuch, *Transformationen der Zeugenschaft: Von David P. Boders frühen Audiointerviews zur Wiederbefragung als Holocaust Testimony* (Göttingen: 2021) as well as the University of Jena's website *Fragen an Displaced Persons, 1946 und heute: Die Interviews von David P. Boder*, at <https://www.dp-boder-1946.uni-jena.de>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[26] Although the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann was key in shaping the public's perception and recognition of subjective statements by Holocaust survivors, it had no direct impact on oral history. See Jan Taubitz, *Holocaust Oral History und das lange Ende der Zeitzeugenschaft* (Göttingen: 2016), esp. 65; see Gerda Klingeböck, "'Stimmen aus der Vergangenheit': Interviews von Überlebenden des Nationalsozialismus in systematischen Sammlungen von 1945 bis heute," in *Ich bin die Stimme der sechs Millionen": Das Videoarchiv im Ort der Information*, ed. Daniel Baranowski (Berlin: 2009), 27–40.

[27] See USC Shoah Foundation, <https://sfi.usc.edu>, accessed March 20, 2023; see also Linde Apel, "'You are participating in history': Das Visual History Archive der Shoah Foundation," *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 5, online edition, no. 3 (2008), 438–45, <https://zeithistorische-forschungen.de/3-2008/4392>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[28] See Ulrike Jureit and Karin Orth, *Überlebensgeschichten: Gespräche mit Überlebenden des KZ-*

Neuengamme (Hamburg: 1994); see Jureit, *Erinnerungsmuster*; see Alexander von Plato, Almut Lehmann,²⁶ and Christoph Thonfeld, eds., *Hitlers Sklaven: Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich* (Vienna: 2008). These interviews are available online at <https://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/index.html>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[29] See Julia Obertreis, “Oral History: Geschichte und Konzeptionen,” in *Oral History: Basistexte*, ed. Julia Obertreis (Stuttgart: 2012), 7–30, here 7–8; see Columbia Center for Oral History Research, <https://www.ccohr.incite.columbia.edu>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[30] See for example Nancy MacKay, *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive* (Walnut Creek: 2016).

[31] See Rebecca Sharpless, “The History of Oral History,” in *Handbook of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, eds. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham: 2007), 9–32; see Wierling, *Oral History*, 83–93.

[32] See Thompson and Bornat, *The Voice*, 16–17 and 61–70.

[33] On comparable developments in Austria, see Gerhard Botz and Josef Weidenholzer, eds., *Mündliche Geschichte und Arbeiterbewegung: Eine Einführung in Arbeitsweisen und Themenbereiche der Geschichte “geschichtsloser” Sozialgruppen* (Vienna: 1984).

[34] See Dirk van Laak, “Alltagsgeschichte,” in Maurer, *Neue Themen*, 14–80.

[35] See Niethammer, introduction, 11.

[36] See Silke Satjukow, “‘Zeitzeugen der ersten Stunde’: Erinnerungen an den Nationalsozialismus in der DDR,” in Sabrow and Frei, *Geburt*, 201–23; Petra Clemens, “The State of Oral History in the GDR,” *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History*, special issue (1990), 107–14.

[37] On the ideological reasons behind the rejection of oral history in East Germany, see Lutz Niethammer, “Glasnost privat 1987,” in *Die volkseigene Erfahrung: Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR; 30 biographische Eröffnungen*, eds. Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling (Berlin: 1991), 9–73, here 10.

[38] See *ibid.*, 23.

[39] For a more comprehensive look, see Hans Joachim Schröder, *Interviewliteratur zum Leben in der DDR: Zur literarischen, biographischen und sozialgeschichtlichen Bedeutung einer dokumentarischen Gattung* (Berlin: 2001).

[40] Drawing upon her own experiences, see Annette Leo, “Oral History in der DDR: Eine sehr

persönliche Rückschau,” in *Es gilt das gesprochene Wort: Oral History und Zeitgeschichte heute*,^{27 von 35} eds. Knud Andresen, Linde Apel, and Kirsten Heinsohn (Göttingen: 2015), 130–43; see also Lutz Niethammer, “Oral History,” in *Paradigmen deutscher Geschichtswissenschaft: Ringvorlesung an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, ed. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (Berlin: 1994), 189–210, here 194–95.

[41] Niethammer, Plato, and Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung*. This project also encouraged networking and discussions of oral history in East Germany during its final years and after reunification.

[42] Lutz Niethammer, *Ego-Histoire? Und andere Erinnerungs-Versuche* (Vienna: 2002), 141.

[43] Annemarie Tröger, Lore Kleiber, and Ingrid Wittmann, “Mündliche Geschichte: Ein Charlottenburger Kiez in der Weimarer Republik und im Nationalsozialismus (1982),” in *Kampf um feministische Geschichten: Texte und Kontexte 1970–1990*, eds. Regine Othmer, Dagmar Reese, and Carola Sachse (Göttingen: 2021), 177–203, available online at https://www.gwi-boell.de/sites/default/files/2021-07/troeger_feministische%20geschichten_inhalt_Einleitung2.pdf, accessed March 20, 2023.

[44] On the professionalization and propagation of oral history practices through international exchanges (against a backdrop of domestic marginalization), see Annette Leo and Franka Maubach, eds., *Den Unterdrückten eine Stimme geben? Die International Oral History Association zwischen politischer Bewegung und wissenschaftlichem Netzwerk* (Göttingen: 2013), esp. 14, as well as Agnès Arp, “Nationale Grenzüberschreitungen mit Rückkopplung: Die Internationalität des Netzwerks,” in Leo and Maubach, *Den Unterdrückten*, 160–94; see also International Oral History Association at <https://www.ioha.org>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[45] Niethammer, introduction, 11–12.

[46] Axel Schildt, “Avantgarde der Alltagsgeschichte: Der Schülerwettbewerb Deutsche Geschichte von den 1970er bis zu den 1990er Jahren,” in Andresen, Apel, and Heinsohn, *Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*, 195–209, here 202; see also Michael Sauer, *Spurensucher: Ein Praxisbuch für historische Projektarbeit* (Hamburg: 2014). The year 1979 is generally seen as a turning point in the cultivation of remembrance in West Germany, with the broadcast of the American TV series *Holocaust* greatly raising public awareness of the Nazi persecution and extermination of the Jews, see Taubitz, *Holocaust*, 54.

[47] See Franka Maubach, “Freie Erinnerung und mitlaufende Quellenkritik: Zur Ambivalenz der Interviewmethoden in der westdeutschen Oral History um 1980,” *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen* 26, no. 1 (2013), 28–52, here 31, available online at <https://elibrary.utb.de/doi/epdf/10.3224/bios.v26i1.16895>

[48] One result was a methodological essay that became foundational and is still widely read today: Lutz Niethammer, “Fragen – Antworten – Fragen: Methodische Erfahrungen und Erwägungen zur Oral History,” in *Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten”: Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern* (vol. 3 of *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet*), eds. Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato (Bonn: 1985), 392–445.

[49] On Peukert’s foundational concept for the Workshop of Memory, see Linde Apel, “Ein besonderes Gedächtnis der Stadt? Eine Bestandsaufnahme zum 30-jährigen Jubiläum der Werkstatt der Erinnerung,” in Apel, *Erinnern*, 49–80; see also the website of the Research Centre for Contemporary History in Hamburg, <https://www.zeitgeschichte-hamburg.de>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[50] Begun in 1988 as *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History*, then renamed in 2001 as *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen*. See also the website of the Institut für Geschichte und Biographie, <https://www.fernuni-hagen.de/geschichteundbiographie>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[51] Niethammer, Plato, and Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung*.

[52] For example at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam, see <https://zzf-potsdam.de/de/zeitgeschichte-digital/online-sammlung-oral-history>, accessed March 20, 2023. A new center for eastern Germany’s oral history is emerging with the recent founding of the Oral History-Forschungsstelle at the University of Erfurt, see <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/philosophische-fakultaet/seminare-professuren/historisches-seminar/professuren/neuere-und-zeitgeschichte-und-geschichtsdidaktik/oral-history-forschungsstelle>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[53] See Alexander Weidle, “Neuntes Netzwerktreffen Oral History, 29.4.–30.4.2021 (digital): Tagungsbericht,” uploaded to H-Soz-Kult on June 25, 2021, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-127543>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[54] See the website of the Oral-History.Digital project, <https://www.oral-history.digital>, accessed March 20, 2023. Switzerland’s oral historians are networked through Oralhistory.ch. National oral history associations can also be found in Poland, the Czech Republic, Israel, the UK, the US, Canada and many other countries.

[55] Lynn Abrams dates oral history’s “theoretical turn” to the 1970s, see Lynn Abrams, “Transforming Oral History through Theory,” in Thompson and Bornat, *The Voice*, 132–39, here 133. On theoretical tools from other disciplines, see foundational study by Jureit, *Erinnerungsmuster*.

- [56] See Maurice Halbwachs, *Das kollektive Gedächtnis* (Stuttgart: 1967; originally published as *La mémoire collective* in 1939), 59. On the link between communication and memories, see Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: 1999, originally published 1992), 36–37.
- [57] See Michael Pollak, *Die Grenzen des Sagbaren: Lebensgeschichten von KZ-Überlebenden als Augenzeugenberichte und als Identitätsarbeit* (Frankfurt: 1988; revised expanded edition Vienna: 2016); see also Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: 1999).
- [58] See Carlos Kölbl and Jürgen Straub, “Erinnerung,” in *Neues Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe*, eds. Petra Kolmer and Armin Wildfeuer (Freiburg: 2011), 668–88, here 669.
- [59] See Jürgen Straub, “Erzähltheorie/Narration,” in *Handbuch qualitative Forschung in der Psychologie*, eds. Günter Mey and Katja Mruck (Wiesbaden: 2010), 133–46, here 137; see also the theoretical work of Jörn Rüsen, for whom historical narration, as a means of organizing the experience of time, functions to create meaning and outlook, as described for example in his *Zeit und Sinn: Strategien historischen Denkens*, rev. ed. (Frankfurt: 2012, first edition 1990).
- [60] A widely discussed example of a fictional Holocaust biography, initially published as an autobiography, is the book *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit 1938-1949* by Benjamin Wilkomirski (Frankfurt: 1995; published in English as *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*). Cf. Stefan Mächler, *Der Fall Wilkomirski: Über die Wahrheit einer Biographie* (Zurich: 2000), as well as Gregor Spuhler, “Der Fall Wilkomirski als Herausforderung für die Oral History,” in *Lebenskunst: Erkundungen zu Biographie, Lebenswelt und Erinnerung*, eds. Konrad J. Kuhn, Katrin Sonntag, and Walter Leimgruber (Cologne: 2017), 540–49.
- [61] Christian Klein and Matías Martínez, introduction to *Wirklichkeitserzählungen: Felder, Formen und Funktionen nicht-literarischen Erzählens*, eds. Christian Klein and Matías Martínez (Stuttgart: 2009), 1–13, here 1.
- [62] See Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, *Strukturen der Lebenswelt* (Konstanz: 2003, originally published 1979/1984), 449–48.
- [63] Jureit, *Erinnerungsmuster*, 27.
- [64] See Straub, “Erzähltheorie,” 137.
- [65] Alexander von Plato, “Oral History und Biografie-Forschung als ‘Verhaltens- und Erfahrungsgeschichte’: Eine wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Skizze,” *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen*, no. 45 (2011), 37–49, emphasis in the original.

[66] See Jureit, *Erinnerungsmuster*, 33. The category of “true” (as the binary counterpart of “false”) is not very useful when dealing with interviews. For a more useful conception of truthfulness, see Gabriele Rosenthal, “Die erzählte Lebensgeschichte als historisch-soziale Realität: Methodologische Implikationen für die Analyse biographischer Texte,” in Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt, *Alltagskultur*, 125–38, here 129–30.

[67] See for example Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds., *Narrative and Genre* (London: 1998).


[68] Portelli, “What Makes,” 49.

[69] On the importance of situational and corporeal aspects when analyzing audiovisual interviews, see Albert Lichtblau, “Opening Up Memory Space: The Challenges of Audiovisual History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford: 2012), 277–84; on the advantages and disadvantages of video as opposed to audio recordings, see Katja Krause, “Interview mit Albert Lichtblau: Oral History – Interviewführung und Interviewinterpretation,” Berlin, August 31, 2012, available at the *Zwangsarbeit 1939-1945* interview archive, <https://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/projekt/experteninterviews/lichtblau/index.html>, accessed March 20, 2023; see also the chapter “Doing Video Oral History,” in Ritchie, *Doing*, 137–60.

[70] See Portelli, “What Makes,” 50; see also Vorländer, “Mündliches,” 24; see Alfred Fleßner, “Hören statt lesen: Zur Auswertung offener Interviews im Wege einfühlernden Nachvollziehens,” *Sozialer Sinn* 2, no. 2 (2001), 349–58, here 351–52. It should be noted that even a recording offers only a fragmentary view of the actual interview situation. See Niethammer, “Fragen,” 405–6.

[71] See Grele, “Ziellose Bewegung,” 205–6; Vorländer, *Oral History*, 16–20; Welzer, “Interview als Artefakt”; Dorothee Wierling, “Zeitgeschichte ohne Zeitzeugen: Vom kommunikativen zum kulturellen Gedächtnis – drei Geschichten und zwölf Thesen,” *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen* 21, no. 1 (2008), 28–36, available online at <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/27020>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[72] See Niethammer, *Lebenserfahrung*, iii.

[73] A counterexample is discussed in Linde Apel, “Jung interviewt Alt: Ein Lehrstück des Scheiterns,” *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen* 25, no. 2 (2012), 296–316, available online at <https://elibrary.utb.de/doi/pdf/10.3224/bios.v25i2.08> , accessed March 20, 2023.

[74] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: 1990).

[75] See Linda Shopes, "Sharing Authority," *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003), 103–10; see also Daniel Kerr, "'We Know What the Problem Is': Using Video and Radio Oral History to Develop Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness," in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, 626–35.

[76] See Abrams, *Oral*, 174.

[77] See for example Kerstin Brückweh, Clemens Villinger, and Kathrin Zöller, eds., *Die lange Geschichte der "Wende": Geschichtswissenschaft im Dialog* (Berlin: 2020).

[78] See for example Kate Reed and Marcia C. Schenck, "The Right to Research: Historical Narratives by Refugee and Global South Researchers" (Montreal: 2023); see also the BMBF project *Interkulturelles Digitales Erinnerungsarchiv: Migrantinnengeschichte als Teilhabe*, which ran 2019–22, <https://heridea.de>, and the currently running project *Ostdeutsche Migrationsgesellschaft selbst erzählen*, <http://lernen-aus-der-geschichte.de/Lernen-und-Lehren/content/15330>, both accessed March 20, 2023.

[79] See Almut Leh, "Forschungsethische Probleme in der Zeitzeugenforschung," *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 13, no. 1 (2000), 64–76; see also Wierling, "Zeitgeschichte."

[80] See Vorländer, *Oral History*, 25; see Abrams, "Transforming," 132.

[81] See Fritz Schütze, *Die Technik des narrativen Interviews in Interaktionsfeldstudien* (vol. 1 of *Arbeitsberichte und Forschungsmaterialien*, Faculty of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld, 1977); Albrecht Lehmann, *Erzählstruktur und Lebenslauf: Autobiographische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt: 1983); Alexander von Plato, "Interview-Richtlinien," in von Plato, Leh, and Thonfeld, *Hitlers Sklaven*, 443–50.

[82] See Breckner, "Von den 'Zeitzeugen,'" 202–9.

[83] See Studs Terkel and Tony Parker, "Interviewing an Interviewer," in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, 147–52, here 148.

[84] See Leh, "Forschungsethische Probleme," 69; Alexander von Plato argues for a fourth phase enabling critical discussion of the narration's content. See Plato, "Interview-Richtlinien," 446–48.

[85] See for example the "Best Practices" guidelines of the Oral History Association at <https://www.oralhistory.org/best-practices>, accessed March 20, 2023; see also Valerie R. Yow, "Interviewing Techniques and Strategies," in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, 153–78; Valerie R. Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Walnut Creek: 2005).

[86] Release forms from various different projects can be found at <https://www.oral-history.digital/dokumente/index.html>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[87] See Frieder Stöckle, “Zum praktischen Umgang mit Oral History,” in Vorländer, *Oral History*, 131–58, here 137–38.

[88] See OHA Statement on Ethics, <https://www.oralhistory.org/oha-statement-on-ethics>; see Leh, “Forschungsethische Probleme.”

[89] See archive section at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, <https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/das-archiv/ueber-das-archiv/bestaende/zeugenschrifttum>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[90] See Linde Apel, “Gesammelte Erzählungen: Mündliche Quellen in der Werkstatt der Erinnerung,” in Linde Apel, Klaus David, and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, eds., *Aus Hamburg in alle Welt: Lebensgeschichten jüdischer Verfolgter aus der Werkstatt der Erinnerung* (Hamburg: 2011), 201–18, here 202–3; similarly, it was a long time before the archive at the Columbia Center for Oral History Research included more than just interview transcriptions.

[91] See Peter Hüttenberger, “Zur Technik der zeitgeschichtlichen Befragungen,” in *Mündliche Geschichte im Rheinland*, ed. Landschaftsverband Rheinland (Cologne: 1991), 63–73 (first published in *Der Archivar* 22 (1969) 167–76), available online at https://afz.lvr.de/media/archive_im_rheinland/publikationen/archivhefte/LVR_Archivheft22.pdf, accessed March 20, 2023; Peter Hüttenberger, “Zeitgeschichtliche Befragung: ein Nachtrag, Juli 1990” in Landschaftsverband Rheinland, *Mündliche*, 75–82.

[92] See this article’s sidebar for the web addresses of the most important interview archives mentioned here.

[93] See Paul Thompson, “Re-Using Qualitative Research Data: A Personal Account,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 1, no. 3 (2000), article 27, available online at <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-1.3.1044>

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, accessed March 20, 2023; James E. Fogerty, “Oral History and Archives: Documenting Context,” in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *Handbook of Oral History* (Lanham: 2006), 207–29.

[94] Joanna Bornat, “A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose,” *Oral History* 31, no. 1 (2003), 47–53.

[95] An example of secondary analysis *avant la lettre* is Christian Geulen and Karoline Tschuggnall, eds., *Aus einem deutschen Leben: Lesarten eines biographischen Interviews* (Tübingen, 2000), which presents seven different analyses of the same interview through the lens of various disciplines.

[96] Brigitte Halbmayr, “Sekundäranalyse qualitativer Daten aus lebensgeschichtlichen Interviews:

Reflexionen zu einigen zentralen Herausforderungen,” *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen* 21, no. 2 (2008), 256–67, available online at <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/27027>, accessed March 20, 2023.


[97] Matthias Frese and Julia Paulus, “Zeitzeugenschaft und mündliche Erinnerung: Zur Sekundäranalyse von Oral-History-Interviews; Einführung und Fragestellungen,” *Westfälische Forschungen* 65 (2015), 237–42.

[98] Almut Leh, “Vierzig Jahre Oral History in Deutschland: Beitrag zu einer Gegenwartsdiagnose von Zeitzeugenarchiven am Beispiel des Archivs ‘Deutsches Gedächtnis,’” *Westfälische Forschungen* 65 (2015), 256–68, here 265–68.

[99] See Linde Apel, “Oral History reloaded: Zur Zweitauswertung von mündlichen Quellen,” *Westfälische Forschungen* 65 (2015), 243–54, here 248–53.

[100] On applying source criticism to interviews, see Jureit, *Erinnerungsmuster*, 28–35.

[101] See Linde Apel, “Auf der Suche nach der Erinnerung: Interviews mit deutschen Juden im lokalhistorischen Kontext,” in Stefanie Fischer, Nathanael Riemer, and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, eds., *Juden und Nicht-Juden nach der Shoah: Begegnungen in Deutschland* (Munich: 2019), 195–209, available online at <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110570083-014/html?lang=de>

, accessed March 20, 2023.

[102] See the special focus on “digital humanities and biographical research” edited by Almut Leh and Eva Ochs for *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen* 30, no. 1/2 (2017), 3–129; see also Douglas Boyd and Mary Larson, *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access and Engagement* (New York: 2014).

[103] The Haus der Geschichte Foundation and the Fraunhofer Institute for Intelligent Analysis and Information Systems are currently exploring the possibilities and limits of using AI for interview analysis: <https://www.hdg.de/stiftung/projekte>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[104] See Douglas Boyd, “Achieving the Promise of Oral History in a Digital Age,” in Ritchie, *The Oxford Handbook*, 285–302; also Judith Keilbach, “Mikrofon, Videotape, Datenbank: Überlegungen zu einer Mediengeschichte der Zeitzeugen,” in Sabrow and Frei, *Geburt*, 281–99, available online at <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/330348>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[105] See Almut Leh, Cord Pagenstecher, and Linde Apel, “Oral History im digitalen Wandel: Interviews als Forschungsdaten,” in Apel, *Erinnern*, 193–222; see also <https://www.oral->

[106] See the plans of NFDI4Memory, a consortium of historically engaged disciplines that is working on building a shared, long-term and sustainable research data infrastructure in Germany, described at <https://4memory.de>, accessed March 20, 2023.

[107] See Knud Andresen, Linde Apel, and Kirsten Heinsohn, introduction to Andresen, Apel, and Heinsohn, *Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*, 7–23.

[108] See Miroslav Vanek, *Around the Globe: Rethinking Oral History with its Protagonists* (Prague: 2013); Leo and Maubach, *Den Unterdrückten*; Alexander von Plato, Dorothee Wierling, and Linde Apel, “Zur Geschichte, Gegenwart und Zukunft der Oral History,” in Apel, *Erinnern*, 19–47.

Empfohlene Literatur zum Thema

Recommended Reading

Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*. 2nd ed. London, 2016. First published 2010

Knud Andresen/Linde Apel/Kirsten Heinsohn eds. *Es gilt das gesprochene Wort: Oral History und Zeitgeschichte heute*. Göttingen, 2015

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Ulrike Jureit, *Erinnerungsmuster: Zur Methodik lebensgeschichtlicher Interviews mit Überlebenden der Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager*. Hamburg, 1999

Lutz Niethammer, “Fragen – Antworten – Fragen: Methodische Erfahrungen und Erwägungen zur Oral History.” In “*Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten*”: *Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern*, edited by Lutz Niethammer, and Alexander von Plato, 392–445. Vol. 3 of *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet*. Berlin, 1985

Julia Obertreis ed., *Oral History: Basistexte*. Stuttgart, 2012

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