

Revisiting the Gender Politics of Memory: Epistemic Struggles, Architectures, and Ecologies of Remembering in East Central Europe¹

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In 2025, the Czech National Museum dedicated a solo exhibition to the life and legacy of Františka Plamínková (1875–1942) – a Czech teacher, politician, women’s rights pioneer, and anti-fascist resistance fighter. Until the exhibition, the public presence (or rather absence of) her story had been emblematic of how significant historical women are treated in collective memory. Though occasionally commemorated by feminist activists, Plamínková remained largely invisible to official mnemonic institutions. The exhibition, driven by the localised ‘herstory turn’ in contemporary memory-making (Pető 2021), marked a milestone: Moving past the institution’s traditional reliance on allegorical muses and symbolic female figures, Plamínková became the first historical woman to have her portrait displayed on the museum’s facade. And yet, it becomes clear to visitors walking through the exhibition – exploring the testimonies of her pupils, the physical spaces in which the women’s rights movement operated, and Plamínková’s networks with women both at home and abroad – that the exhibition’s narrative structure continues to navigate a subtle tension. It balances the institutional

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and cultural demand for a 'great person' narrative with a more nuanced portrayal of collective labour and identity.

Rather than merely presenting Plamínková as an isolated historical heroine or a static role model for contemporary political struggles for women's empowerment, the exhibition contextualises her life within a broader, collaborative social movement. As the exhibition text itself states: 'Františka Plamínková was not alone in her efforts! She was very aware of the importance of collective organised work, networking and women's solidarity. She was a leading figure and part of the movement.' Through this approach, curator and historian Jitka Gelnarová actively challenges the paradigm of the solitary, almost individualistic historical protagonist – a framework all too frequently applied to both male and female historical actors. Moreover, the exhibition explicitly invites visitors, particularly educators and students, to rethink the standard national narrative taught in schools and preserved in mainstream historical sources: the myth that women in Czechoslovakia were simply 'granted' suffrage in 1918, rather than having actively fought for it.

Ultimately, the exhibition serves as a powerful mnemonic site, where the story of one historical individual becomes a vehicle for retelling the history of the broader women's movement and of a specific period in the history of Czechoslovakia itself. In this regard, the project aligns closely with the theoretical frameworks outlined by Linda Zerilli (2008) for political science and Joan Wallach Scott (1986) for historiography. It does not just render women's experiences visible where they have been systemically forgotten; it actively disrupts dominant collective memories of historical events, challenges traditional norms of visibility and significance, and unpacks the very mechanisms and processes through which gendered collective memory is constructed.

This special issue is animated by a similarly multi-layered landscape that can function as an intellectual, affective, and geopolitical map of feminist memory studies in, from, and about East Central Europe. As readers 'walk through' this volume, they are invited to navigate through diverse approaches to mnemonic practices – ranging from retrieving lost memories of women to a structural critique of historical events, institutions, and methodologies. Readers will encounter an attempt to enrich and diversify the history of the Czechoslovak dissident movement by foregrounding its female participants. The path will then shift to analysing the structural mechanisms of state memory-making that render women's contributions to nation-building in Kosovo invisible, before adopting a queer perspective to demonstrate how ethnographic archives can challenge the homophobic, nationalist project in contemporary Hungary, or rethinking the late 1980s in state-socialist Poland through the lens of artistic performance. This exploration deliberately blurs the line between textual analysis and physical space. As well as visiting traditional archives, *táncház* (dance houses), and theatres, readers will be invited on a series of actual, on-the ground, walking



tours. One stop on the tour involves critically engaging with the Varna *Monument of Soviet–Bulgarian Friendship*, where a gender lens illuminates the power dynamics and affective economy of public socialist architecture. Another tour will take readers through the streets of Budapest, prompting readers to question the emancipatory potential of urban memory projects where visual visibility is treated as the sole criterion for progress.

Embedded within these physical landscapes, while simultaneously moving beyond them, is the digital sphere – a potentially democratising, yet highly volatile ecosystem. In this part of their journey readers will encounter the digital archives documenting Ukrainian women at war, which are actively shaping both immediate and future memories of female participation in defence and nation-building. The trajectory concludes by exploring the digitised, mediated memories of restricted reproductive rights in state-socialist Romania – a historical trauma gaining urgent resonance amidst contemporary illiberal efforts to curtail sexual and reproductive justice.

Taken together, the contributions – comprising five peer-reviewed articles, three essays, and two book reviews – intentionally move beyond a simple politics of recovery. While they share an underlying commitment to uncovering marginalised or erased women's experiences, they simultaneously demonstrate that visibility alone does not dismantle the deeper, gendered structures that govern historical meaning. Instead, memory is revealed as a dynamic, contested field in which recognition, authority, and political belonging are continuously negotiated.

Developments in memory studies reflected in this Special Issue

One of the key developments to emerge in the field of memory studies in recent years is the shift in focus from recognition and recovery – as outlined above – to uncovering the processes and logic of memory-making, where gender is understood as a key structuring principle (Pető, Phoenix 2019; Dragojlovic, Quinan 2023; Gray, Martin, Reeves 2026). A related development is the shift in attention from what is remembered to the form of remembrance itself, as studies are increasingly analysing how infrastructure – in the form of space, sound, narrative sequencing, emotional identification, and affective registers – produces gendered subjects within national, social, and sexuality-tied boundaries (Li 2023; O'Mahony 2024). To understand, challenge, and overcome these boundaries, queer and trans approaches in memory studies intervene in recognition and recovery work, while offering multiple invitations to rethink and reframe temporality, archives, and relatedness (Çalışkan 2019, 2023; Dragojlovic, Quinan 2023).

There is a strong strand of scholarship that conceptualises memory work as a crucial part of changing political projects, especially far right and illiberalism (Pető 2021;

Pető, Klacsmann 2025; Rosenfeld 2021). Gender matters here both as an object of institutional attack and as the core of the broader reconstruction of the political and social order (Pető 2021). While studies mostly focus on the mnemonic work by far right and illiberal actors, gendered memory-building is also connected to political counter-publics and reparative justice (Pető, Phoenix 2019).

The theorisation of memory as labour, while far from being new, provides the field with a language for thinking about how survivors' work, activists' curation, care work, and embodied testimony are converted into durable mnemonic value and then institutionalised as mnemonic capital (Allen 2014; Reading 2016, 2019, 2021). 'Whether asserting the right to retain a name, to generate a commemoration of women's suffrage, to change the list and create a gender equal list of scientists, to amplify and reinforce memories of abuse – all these mnemonic acts, great and small, require consciously controlling the means of remembering, the investment of daily mnemonic labour and accrual of mnemonic value to create long term and enduring mnemonic capital in various states', asserts Anna Reading (2019: 2).

Building on this conceptualisation of mnemonic labour, the authors of this special issue engage in a twofold intervention: they examine the processes, circumstances, and forms of intervention of various mnemonic actors, such as performers in Poland, dissidents in Czechoslovakia, folk dancers in Hungary, and combatants in Ukraine. At the same time, besides their academic work, they also contribute their own mnemonic labour, potentially recalibrating the value these memories gain in the public and academic spheres.

In this sense, we hope that the journey this special issue provides does not end with its publication; on the contrary, we intend for it to start a new life among readers, scholars, activists, and students. We are fully aware that the issue enters an academic field structured by unequal power relations along the lines of the East and West – or the Global North, South, and 'periphery' – imperial and colonial materialities, scientometrics, and impact factors, as well as fashionable academic buzzwords. As scholars working from Slovakia, we have been acutely aware that questions of memory are inseparable from questions of epistemic authority. But we still hope that the issue will make a valuable contribution to the gendered redistribution of mnemonic capital (Reading 2019). That this distribution is in flux is evident from the recent contributions of inspiring mnemonic actors in East Central Europe working within the framework of research projects such as 'The History of Feminist Political Thought and Women's Rights Discourses in East Central Europe 1929–2001', led by Zsófia Lóránd, and 'Women Experts and Feminist Knowledge Production in Post-War East Central Europe (1945–1989)', led by Annina Gagyiova and Natalia Jarska. These new archives, translations of resources, and the rethinking of the canon of women's thought all contribute to new forms of memory and their global institutionalisation.



At the same time, feminist activists in East Central Europe have been doing grass-roots mnemonic work for decades – for instance, by constructing women’s history projects or building, caring for, and reproducing feminist libraries and archives. This work is currently threatened by illiberal political interventions, – for example, the Jiřina Šiková Library run by the Gender Studies organisation in Prague, Czech Republic, and the first and biggest feminist library in Slovakia, run by the organisation ASPEKT in Bratislava, are both at risk of demise. These political steps confirm that mnemonic work and the undoing of what is known about our society and its gender order is at the heart of illiberal political projects. In this context, it is crucial to understand and rethink different types of mnemonic initiatives.

One of many possible readings of the Special Issue

The types of intervention made in this special issue reflect the ideational dynamics within memory studies described above. They aim to deepen and broaden the understanding of gendered mnemonic work in East Central Europe and beyond, while clearly re-valuing and re-structuring public and academic mnemonic fields. As one possible approach to this special issue, we suggest reading its contributions along four thematic axes: 1) epistemic injustice and the struggle for recognition; 2) architectures and ecologies of memory; 3) nationalism and coloniality; 4) postmemory and temporality.

Epistemic injustice and the struggle for recognition

A central conceptual thread running through this issue is the problem of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), which is understood as the structural denial of certain groups’ credibility as knowers and historical agents. In the context of gendered memory, this injustice is not only about exclusion from archives or historical narratives, but about the devaluation of specific forms of labour, testimony, and experience.

This is particularly evident in Marta Edith Holečková’s analysis of women’s participation in the Czechoslovak dissident movement around Charter 77. Holečková shows that women were not marginal actors in this intellectual and political environment but were central to its operation as organisers, translators, editors, archivists, and producers of informal intellectual spaces. However, their contributions remain under-represented in the ‘canonical’ memory of dissidence, which privileges visible authorship and public leadership. The domestic ‘salons’ organised by women emerge here as alternative epistemic spaces in which political and intellectual life was sustained outside formal institutions.

A similar logic of epistemic exclusion operates in Lea Hensch’s study of Kosovo, where post-war commemorative culture elevates the figure of the militarised male

freedom fighter while confining women to symbolic roles as mothers of the nation or passive victims. Women's extensive participation in nation-building is thus not denied outright and openly but is reframed in ways that strips these women of political agency.

Mariya Shcherbyna and Tetiana Havlin extend this argument into a current war context through their analysis of women combatants in the ongoing Russian military aggression in Ukraine. The concept of epistemic repair (Fricker 2007) highlights how digital memory practices can actively reconstruct women as historical subjects in real time. However, even here, recognition and mnemonic capital are not automatic: they must be produced through a narrative struggle against entrenched androcentric and imperial memory regimes.

The academic effort towards epistemic repair is reconstructed in Mária Mokrá's review of the compendium *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Zsófia Lóránd, Adela Hincu, Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc, and Katarzyna Stańczak-Wislicz. Mokrá offers an intergenerational reading of this feminist intervention into the canon of political thought, reclaiming lost ideas and intellectual frameworks while offering a glimpse into the process of post-memory in the making.

Architectures and ecologies of memory: monuments, streets, archives, and digital platforms

A second key axis of the issue concerns the architectures (Bahloul 1996) and ecologies (Brown, Hoskins 2010; Hoskins 2011) through which memory is materialised and circulated. These are not neutral containers of remembrance but active systems of classification, meaning-making, and transformation.

Dafina Nedelcheva's analysis of the *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship in Varna* shows how monuments function as pedagogical devices that shape affective relationships to history. The monument does not merely commemorate 'liberation' but authoritatively teaches visitors to feel geopolitical hierarchy as natural and desirable. Through its layered symbolic structure, imperial, state-socialist, and nationalist meanings accumulate into what she describes as a palimpsestic formation of memory. Here, memory is represented as a continuously reactivated script that organises affectivity, identity, and political subjectivity.

Ráhel K. Turai's study of street-naming practices in Budapest extends this infrastructural perspective into the everyday governance of urban spaces. Street names honouring socialist women such as Anna Koltói become sites of continual ideological negotiation. Their repeated erasure and partial restoration across different political regimes reveal how public memory is governed through administrative practices that



render certain historical subjects visible or invisible depending on the shifting political logic. The street, in this sense, becomes an archive where competing regimes of value are produced.

The ambiguous role of archives is explored in Anisha Anantpurkar's essay about folk dance in Hungary. On the one hand, ethnographic films are presented as a technology through which an imagined Hungarianness is constructed, embodied, and transmitted. At the same time, however, these films serve as tools through which the dominant notions of authenticity – tied to ethno-nationalism, heteronormativity, and cultural purity – are challenged. Approached from a queer perspective, the archival films are subjected to a creative reinterpretation, thereby supporting the construction of alternative identities, somatic freedom, and the development of a counter-memory.

Digital ecologies introduce a further transformation. In the Ukrainian case, digital platforms such as *Incredible Women* and *Her War Story* enable new forms of participatory memory-making that bypass traditional institutional gatekeepers. These initiatives not only preserve testimonies but actively construct new historical subjects through multimedia narration. Yet, as Monica Ciobanu's analysis of Romanian digital memory shows, digital visibility does not guarantee emancipatory outcomes. The *Jurnalul Decretului* project reveals how memories of reproductive violence under state-socialist pro-natalist policies become sites of ideological contestation, mobilised both for reproductive rights advocacy and for conservative, 'anti-gender' political agendas. Digital memory thus emerges as an ecology of both democratisation and the dismantling of democratic principles.

Gender, nationalism, and coloniality

A third major thread that runs through this issue is the entanglement of gender with nationalism and colonial power. Several contributions demonstrate that collective memory is a key site where gendered hierarchies are naturalised through nationalist and imperial narratives.

In Kosovo, the exclusion of women from national memory is structurally linked to militarised nationalism, which foregrounds the figure of the male fighter as the primary embodiment of the nation. In Bulgaria, the narrative of 'liberation' operates through gendered and affective tropes that recast geopolitical hierarchy in the familial terms of protection and dependency. In both cases, gender functions as a symbolic mechanism through which political domination is rendered legitimate.

These dynamics are further complicated by the postcolonial and decolonial perspectives applied in several contributions, particularly in the Ukrainian and Bulgarian cases. Here, memory is framed as a site of interpretive sovereignty: the capacity to

narrate one's own history becomes central to processes of decolonisation. The figure of the 'woman at war', as proposed in the analysis of testimonies of Ukrainian female combatants, emerges as a decolonial commemorative subject who disrupts both imperial and nationalist frameworks of gendered memory.

Post-memory, intergenerational transmission, and temporal complexity

In this special issue we also foreground the temporal dimensions of memory, particularly through the concept of post-memory (Hirsch 2012). In the Romanian case, the intergenerational transmission of trauma related to reproductive policies under state socialism reveals how memory is shaped by both affective inheritance and contemporary political struggles. Similarly, the articles focused on Poland and Romania demonstrate how experiences of state socialism are reactivated and reinterpreted by subsequent generations, often in ways that are politically contested.

The issue's focus on intergenerational transmission and alternative memory practices is further enriched by Rita Müller's essay on the 1988 Mielno gathering and its later theatrical re-enactment in *Lesbian Sunset*. By examining how queer histories survive not through stable archives but through mediated recollection, performance, and affective attachment, the essay challenges the notion that invisibility necessarily implies absence. Instead, it reveals memory to be a dynamic ecology in which meanings are continuously reactivated across time. The case of Mielno demonstrates how queer engagements with the past can generate new forms of historical consciousness, while simultaneously questioning established oppositions between past and present, East and West, and identity and politics.

The temporal complexity of memory is further deepened in Roman Džambazovič's review of Olga Gyárfášová's interviews with women from the independent scene in Bratislava in late state-socialist Czechoslovakia. Here, memory becomes explicitly dialogical: the author engages in a parallel conversation with her younger self, blurring the boundary between past and present subjectivities. This reflexive structure highlights memory not as transmission alone but as ongoing self-construction across time.

Architectures and ecologies of memory as epistemic struggle

Across these diverse contexts, a shared analytical insight emerges: memory is neither a stable archive nor a simple narrative of the past. Rather, it is a form of labour conducted within material structures by both individual and collective actors. It is an ensemble of architectures and ecologies of memory that organise epistemic authority, political legitimacy, and social recognition. Within these architectures and ecologies, gender operates as a key principle of differentiation, shaping who can be recognised as a historical subject and under what conditions.



This perspective allows us to move beyond a binary framework of remembering and forgetting. The contributions show that women and queer people are not simply excluded from memory; rather, they are often included in highly constrained forms that limit their agency, such as symbolic motherhood, victimhood, or auxiliary labour. Conversely, new forms of visibility – particularly those enabled by digital technologies or grassroots archival practices – do not automatically dismantle existing hierarchies of recognition.

Instead, memory is revealed to be a field of tension between epistemic repair and epistemic regulation. On the one hand, feminist and decolonial practices seek to restore women's and queer people's subjectivity as knowledge-producing agents. On the other, nationalist, imperial, and illiberal frameworks continuously reshape the memory landscape in ways that either reassert established hierarchies or produce new forms of hierarchical social order.

Gendered memory as a site of political possibility: by way of conclusion

The contributions to this special issue demonstrate that gender and memory intersect not only at the level of representation but also at the level of epistemic and political architectures and ecologies. By bringing together feminist memory studies, postcolonial and decolonial theory, epistemologies of injustice, and analyses of digital and spatial memory, this issue offers an in-depth reflection on the politics of remembering in East Central Europe. It is also the outcome of largely invisible mnemonic labour over the course of more than a year and an invitation to further conversation.

Although this Special Issue is mostly devoted to East Central Europe, it also provides an opportunity to make global connections. As we have known for some time now, a region is not a peripheral case, but rather a particularly revealing site through which to understand the broader global transformations of how memory, gender, and power intersect.

Clearly, memory has been reasserting itself as a very present and consequential (even if volatile) arena of political life. Across the so-called global West, disputes over monuments, historical curricula, war remembrance, and the legitimacy of competing historical narratives have become central to political conflict.

Thus, memory has remained one of the most contested terrains of contemporary politics, not only in terms of what is remembered, but also in terms of how remembering itself is organised, authorised, and experienced. Feminist scholarship has long shown that collective memory is never neutral: it is shaped by gendered hierarchies of visibility, authority, and legitimacy. However, the contributions to this Special Issue on the gender aspects of memory suggest that the stakes of memory are not ex-

haunted by questions of inclusion or omission. Across diverse contexts in East-Central and Southeastern Europe, memory emerges as a field of epistemic struggle in which historical subjects are produced, regulated, and transformed.

Rather than treating memory as a repository of the past, the articles in this issue examine it as a collection of distinctive architectures and ecologies of memory – material, institutional, digital, and affective – through which gendered political and cultural orders are continuously reproduced and contested.

These architectures and ecologies determine not only who is remembered, but also who can be recognised as a knower, a political actor, or a legitimate subject of history. They also influence how experiences travel across time, from lived experience to intergenerational transmission, from private testimony to public commemoration, and from embodied memory to digital circulation.

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