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‘We had to become criminals, to survive under communism!’:

Testimonies of Petty Criminality and Everyday Morality

in Late Socialist Central Europe

Kelly Hignett

Abstract:

Although communist propaganda frequently claimed that crime rates were negligible in Eastern Europe, a substantial informal economy developed during the latter decades of communist rule. Large numbers of citizens regularly engaged in a range of ‘petty illegalities’ including theft, underground trading and economic exchange, bribery and corruption. These activities were officially prohibited, but were widely accepted and tolerated in practice, both by ordinary citizens and state authorities. Drawing on written memoirs and original data from a series of oral interviews conducted in three former communist countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland – this chapter analyses popular motivations for engaging in petty economic crime under communism, providing some fascinating insights into the ways in which individuals internalised, interpreted and presented their own criminal behaviour, through the adoption of various ‘coping mechanisms’ to minimise the contradictions evident in personal accounts of life under the communist system and to justify and ‘normalise’ their own behaviour within it. The result is a complex and richly textured analysis of petty criminality and popular morality in late-communist central Europe.

In the twenty five years that have passed since the collapse of communism across Eastern Europe, an increasing number of historians have realised the value of personal testimony as a source to enhance and enrich our understanding of the conditions, working and legacies of communist rule in the region. The former communist bloc has provided fertile ground for proponents of oral history and memory studies. The fall of communism ‘unleashed a tide of memories’, as the lifting of censorship restrictions allowed many people to speak openly about ‘how things really were’ for the first time and fuelled the writing and publication of diaries, memoirs and personal autobiographies reflecting upon the recent past.¹ Increasingly, academic researchers from within and outside the former communist bloc have recognised the value of oral history and personal memoirs as the basis for innovative and informed academic studies.² Beyond the academic sphere, we have also seen efforts to record and document personal testimonies on a larger scale. In many cases the internet provides an ideal medium for wider dissemination, with interview transcripts and recordings often made available online.³

Early proponents of oral history methodology saw it as a means of providing evidence that could not be retrieved from more conventional sources and a way to uncover ‘hidden’ histories by gathering information, experiences and viewpoints from those who had been marginalised, neglected or excluded from ‘mainstream’ history. Today there is no shortage of textual sources available to historians researching communist Eastern Europe. Numerous archives have opened up to researchers in the post-communist period, but while these are an extremely valuable source of information, much communist-era documentation was distorted by ideology and subject to high levels of censorship and propaganda, often requiring historians to ‘read between the lines’ in much the same way as citizens remember doing during the years of communist rule. Personal testimonies can, therefore, provide a useful

supplement to official records. Oral history has also been harnessed as a method of revealing previously ‘hidden aspects’ of life behind the iron curtain, as scholars increasingly seek to create a broader spectrum of the lived experience of communism, by focusing on recording the thoughts and experiences of ‘the unorganised, quiescent majority’ of the population.⁴

However, oral history has been subjected to considerable methodological scrutiny, giving rise to a number of ethical concerns and regulatory guidelines. Critics have challenged the accuracy and reliability of personal testimony as a historical source, citing the fallibility of individual memory, lack of neutrality, subjectivity and performativity of the narrator. Yet whereas certain aspects of oral interviews can be problematic in terms of their empirical function, they can also provide us with valuable insights that enhance rather than detract from their value as a historical source. Abrams argues that rather than approaching oral interviews as a simple data mine, historians should consider them as a complex narrative performance.⁵ We should recognise that while interviewees may not always recount ‘the truth’, they will express ‘their truth’, telling us ‘not just what happened but what they thought happened’ and revealing much about how they have subsequently internalised and interpreted these events.⁶ In this sense, the significance of oral research in former communist countries extends far beyond its role of ‘filling the gaps’ in official histories, serving as a means of illuminating and understanding the relationship between subjectivity, memory and totalitarianism.⁷

Today, scholars recognise that the raw material of oral history consists not just of factual statements and literal narration, but in the significance of the oral narrative itself as an expression and representation of culture, memory and ideology, a multi-layered communicative event that can be analysed and interpreted to reveal hidden levels of discourse.⁸ This has important implications for historians, who must act as ‘intuitive and

imaginative interpreters', analysing not just the words said (or not said) but also the language employed and the structures of explanation to 'decode' the deeper meanings embedded within individual testimonies.⁹ This approach poses new ethical challenges for historians, who often seek to reshape the original interview by constructing a 'second level narrative', which has the potential for misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and the imposition of a second level of subjectivity.¹⁰

My own research into the informal economy in late-socialist central Europe has utilised information from a variety of sources, including official documentation, statistical data and media reports, but I have also drawn heavily on personal testimony, using written memoirs and evidence from a series of oral interviews conducted in three former communist countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland – between 2004 and 2006. The initial aim of these interviews was to gather information to support my research into criminal networks in late-socialist and early post-socialist Central Europe, and to obtain personal insights and original illustrative material. However, reconstructive cross analysis of these narratives has the potential to reveal a richly textured discourse relating to petty criminality and popular morality in late-communist central Europe. My research also required engagement with many significant ethical issues relating to the conduct and subsequent interpretation of oral history interviews.

Researching the Informal Economy:

From the late 1960s, a substantial informal economy developed across the communist bloc, comprised of a range of semi-legal and illegal acts including undeclared private employment, moonlighting, small scale theft and pilferage from the workplace, underground market

trading, corruption and bribery. Grossman described the communist informal economy as comprised of economic activities which met at least one of the following criteria: (1) being directly on private account, whether conducted legally or illegally (2) being (to the actor) knowingly illegal in some substantial respect(s), while Los described how 'while their etiquette and secondary characteristics may differ from country to country, as well as in urban and rural areas, these [informal] networks inevitably involve goods snatched from workplaces; private services rendered during work hours; private utilisation of state machines, tools or transport; producing goods 'under the counter'; contraband and illegal trafficking'.¹¹ These activities were officially prohibited and condemned by the regimes in power, but in practice they were widely accepted and tolerated by both ordinary citizens and by state authorities.

The evidence suggests that virtually all citizens engaged in various 'petty illegalities' on an occasional, regular or – frequently – a daily basis. A survey conducted by the Economic Research Institute in Prague in April 1988 found that only two out of 600 respondents claimed they had never used illegal means to procure goods or services.¹² Illegal economic exchanges also created 'invisible incomes', earnings not declared to the state for taxation. By 1984 personal expenditure in Poland was 13 per cent higher than levels of registered income, while in Hungary 'unofficial earnings' were calculated to total as much as 100,000 million forints per annum (20 per cent of the total national income) with an estimated 75 per cent of families reliant on some form of 'unofficial' income.¹³ Corruption and bribery were also widespread, and although the corrupt nature of those in positions of authority (such as Communist Party officials and law enforcement officers) was particularly well documented, bribery occurred at all levels of exchange, often taking the form of 'gifting' or an 'exchange of favours' at lower levels. Although most individual acts of petty theft and illegal economic

exchange took place on a small scale, by the 1980s these ‘everyday crimes’ were so prevalent that their combined cost translated into significant losses for the increasingly struggling state economies. In addition to promoting popular acceptance of these illegalities, the informal economy also encouraged materialism and individual entrepreneurship, ‘capitalist values’ that were officially condemned by socialist ideology. Some studies even suggest that the expansion of the informal economy directly contributed to the collapse of communism.¹⁴

The very nature of the informal or ‘underground’ economy means that relatively little reliable documentary evidence, records or statistical information exists. In fact communist-era political, law enforcement and media reports tended deliberately to downplay the extent of the informal economy. However, the prominent role that the shadow economy played in everyday life does feature in many autobiographical accounts. For example, Susan Shapiro recounts her own experiences of making corrupt payments ‘under the table’ to get a hotel room in Romania and obtaining meat and petrol coupons ‘through black market connections’ in Czechoslovakia during a visit to Eastern Europe during the 1980s, actions that led her to reflect that ‘every day in this part of the world, it seems that we are involved in a situation where we must do something illegal’.¹⁵ Janos Kenedi’s memoir *Do It Yourself* tells of how he was drawn into a ‘grey zone of criminality and moral ambiguity’ in Hungary as he attempted to build his own house.¹⁶ American sociologist Janine Wedel, who spent time as a doctoral researcher in Poland from 1982 to 1986, also draws heavily on personal insights and experiences to portray the workings of the Polish informal economy in her book *The Private Poland*.¹⁷

Conversations about Crime: Methodology and Ethical Considerations:

Personal testimony has played an important part in my own research. Data gathered during oral interviews was utilised as an important source to supplement the limited documentation available, as a method of exploring peoples' motivations for engaging in petty economic crime and their experiences of the informal economy. While a relatively small number of individuals were sampled from the three countries that formed the basis of my research, reconstructive cross-analysis of their testimonies provides valuable insights into social attitudes towards petty criminality and perceptions of popular morality under late socialism. However, this required consideration of various ethical responsibilities, both in terms of the 'duty of care' towards my interviewees and with regard to my own role as an 'intuitive and imaginative interpreter' of their testimonies.

From 2004 to 2006, I conducted 38 oral interviews in total (14 in Poland, 12 in Hungary and 12 in the Czech Republic) as part of my doctoral research into crime networks in late communist and early post-communist Central Europe. Almost all of the interviews took place in and around the capital cities of Budapest, Prague and Warsaw. The interviewees included individuals who had directly experienced and engaged in the informal economy and those who had been formally charged with preventing and prosecuting such criminal activities during the communist era. However, this distinction was not always mutually exclusive. For example, I had conversations with a former Hungarian border guard who admitted occasional cross-border smuggling and a Polish policeman who admitted he had taken bribes. Three people who were unable to meet with me in person also responded to some of my questions via email and during my fieldwork I also met with representatives from various organisations in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to discuss criminality and contemporary organised crime more generally.

The age of the interviewees ranged from 28 to 57. There was a reasonably even gender split: 25 of the 38 interviewees were male, but this was partly a result of the interviews I conducted with ‘authority figures’ (for example, police and border guards), which are traditionally male-dominated services. Almost all of the interviews took place on a one-to-one basis, although in most cases an interpreter was also present to ensure a fuller and more accurate translation. As this was designed to be a broad, comparative study spanning three countries, I was unable to rely fully on my own language proficiency. A few interviews were also conducted in English. As far as possible, the interviews were conducted as open, relatively informal, semi-structured conversations, although the conversations I had with those who still held positions of authority in state structures naturally tended to assume more formality. I had prepared a list of general questions to create a ‘skeleton structure’ for the interviews, but I adapted and diversified this depending on individual circumstances. Other than this, I tried to restrict my role to that of a facilitator, asking initial questions and making occasional prompts and interjections to seek clarification, additional details or to express general interest and encouragement. The majority of interviewees, while happy to speak to me, were not comfortable with an aural record of the conversation, so I relied largely on detailed handwritten notes I made during our conversations, which I then typed up as a transcript as soon as possible after completion of the interview.

Personal testimony can be an extremely useful source for scholars studying various aspects of criminality. Oral histories play an important role in ‘humanising’ offenders within their wider social context and can also ‘reveal circumstances mainly hidden from the crime researcher who relies solely on quantitative or official sources – situations that were untrustworthy, places that were to be avoided, suspicious people not to be approached, crimes never reported to the authorities...’.¹⁸ However, criminal ‘confessions’ can be difficult to obtain, and there

are important ethical issues to consider if researchers encourage their interviewees to discuss behaviours that are generally considered to be illegal or immoral. During the conversations I had, many individuals admitted to law-breaking and involvement in questionable economic activities during the late-socialist period. This carried a level of personal risk, with the potential for negative consequences for the interviewees. If these admissions were made public, they may suffer social embarrassment, and risk losing respect from friends and family members. An existing or potential employer may perceive them as untrustworthy or dishonest, something which could be particularly problematic for those individuals who were still employed in post-communist politics or law enforcement. There may even be the potential for legal consequences: other people named during the interview could take issue if they considered what was said about them to be defamatory, or the interviewee may themselves become the subject of a criminal investigation.

For this reason, when I initially conceived this project, I worried that it might prove difficult to convince people to talk to me about their experiences of the informal economy. In general, however, the people I met were extremely open and candid when discussing their personal involvement. Only four of the people I approached refused to speak to me at all, one of whom explained that he felt this would be ‘too dangerous for him’.¹⁹ This general openness could be explained by numerous factors: I was interested in learning about peoples’ experiences during the relative freedom and relaxation of the Brezhnev era rather than during earlier periods of more overt terror and repression; the communist system had since definitively ended, creating a clear break between ‘past’ and ‘present’ and during the time period that had since elapsed political, economic, social and legal changes had transformed conditions in all three countries beyond recognition. This context appeared to help interviewees to create and maintain a

distance between their present day selves and their past ‘communist selves’, in terms of their own behaviour, morals, values and outlook when constructing their narrative.

Despite this ‘openness’ many interviewees only agreed to speak to me on condition of anonymity, so I agreed to use pseudonyms in any published work. For this reason, the names quoted here have been changed, although all other personal details remain accurate. It has long been accepted that historians have a duty to respect any assurances of confidentiality given to informants. However, this understanding has been challenged by the recent Boston College Case concerning ‘The Belfast Project’. This was a series of academic interviews conducted between 2001 and 2006, involving former members of the IRA and other militia groups involved in the Irish ‘Troubles’ (1960s-1990s), where 46 participants agreed to give interviews based on the understanding that recordings would be kept confidential until after their deaths. However, in December 2011 a US court ruled that despite this agreement, oral data should be handed over to British authorities investigating the 1972 murder of Jean McConville by the Provisional IRA, as criminal investigations should take priority over academic pledges of confidentiality, something which sets a dangerous precedent – both ethically and legally - for oral historians.²⁰ .

The nature of my research meant that it was particularly important to ensure I gained full, informed consent from all interviewees. At the outset of each interview, I discussed these issues with each participant, who then confirmed they were still happy to proceed. I was largely able to offer reassurance about any concerns, as overall the risk of any of the scenarios outlined above was low. In most instances, the interview focused on discussing semi-legal and small-scale ‘petty illegalities’ rather than more serious criminal offences. The activities discussed had taken place under a state system that no longer existed and legal

reforms in the years since 1989 meant that many of the laws that had previously been broken no longer applied.²¹ In my role as a historian rather than a criminologist or lawyer, the conversations were designed to take the form of a discussion rather than an interrogation, so while many interviewees made general admissions about their personal involvement in the informal economy and even referred to specific examples, precise details (such as times, dates, or names identifying individual underground market suppliers) were generally not included, and given the nature of the subject matter, I did not push them for this information, although this made ‘fact checking’ more problematic. The interview transcripts were to be held as a private academic resource by me, rather than made publically accessible via archival deposits or online, and all participants were guaranteed full anonymity if their interview was referenced by me in any published work.

Finally, it is important to consider the ethical debates around the role and responsibilities of the historian, as interviewer and interpreter, by questioning how the interview dynamic may shape both the interviewee’s original narrative, and the historian’s own perceptions, interpretations and subsequent construction of a ‘second narrative’. It is widely acknowledged that the presence of an audience – comprised, in this instance, of the interviewer (myself) and various third parties assisting with translation – may encourage the ‘performative’ aspect of oral testimony, influencing both narrative content and expression. This is true even if the dynamic is relaxed and informal, with minimum interference from the interviewer. Abrams believes that the oral interview is shaped by perceptions on both sides, as ‘two worlds, or subjectivities, are colliding’.²² This is particularly pertinent in this context, as my identity - as a young, female, ‘western’ historian, an ‘outsider’ who has never personally experienced life under communism - may have influenced the responses of my interviewees, on a number of different levels. Due to her experiences while conducting

research in Poland, Wedel concluded that her identity as a ‘westerner’ was a particular limitation, as ‘the mere presence of a foreign researcher will influence the observed facts’, encouraging miscommunication and role playing on both sides.²³

As Passerini noted, ‘when writing about the impact of an ideology, oral historians should not simplify and enjoy the ethical vantage-point that a capitalist democracy supposedly provides’.²⁴ Due to my status as an ‘outsider’, there is also a danger of my – consciously or unconsciously - imposing ‘western’ norms about morality and criminality when interpreting the interview narrative. While complete objectivity is probably impossible, as far as possible I have tried to remain aware of this pitfall, and avoid it.

‘We had to become criminals, to survive under communism!’:

During my research, oral accounts about the prevalence of the communist informal economy largely confirmed the information available in written sources and the secondary literature, while also contributing some useful anecdotal evidence and original insights to my own study. In many ways, however, perhaps the most interesting aspect of these conversations was not what was said, or what was not said but *how* the interview respondents constructed their narrative when discussing and describing their experiences of, engagement with and attitudes towards the communist-era informal economy. On a surface level, the predominant narrative that emerged from my interviews was, in many respects, confused and contradictory. However, deeper narrative analysis can reveal much about the ways in which individuals internalised, interpreted and presented their own criminal behaviour under communism. It became apparent that many respondents had adopted various ‘coping mechanisms’ to minimise the contradictions evident in their accounts of life under communist

system and to justify and ‘normalise’ their own behaviour within it. Portelli suggests that three main modes of narrative exist within oral history: Institutional (‘It was the custom or the rule’); Communal (‘We did this’) and Personal (‘I did this’).²⁵ Interestingly, all three of these narrative modes were clearly present throughout my interviews, and while they often converged, they were also juxtaposed to a degree.

Economic Rationality - ‘The Survival Thesis’: By far the most common explanation that dominated the narratives of those I spoke to was that of economic necessity or ‘survival’. When asked about their motivations for participation in the informal economy, virtually all interviewees rationalised their illegal activities in practical terms, claiming they were required to turn to crime to maintain their standard of living in the face of deteriorating economic conditions.²⁶ For example:

We had to become criminals, to survive under communism! (Magda, 51, Warsaw, July 2004)

We had to use the illegal economy to maintain our standard of living (Pawel, 42, Warsaw, July 2004)

Everyone was a criminal ... because of the economic shortages. We had to break the law every day, just in small ways, just to get by (Petra, 44, Prague, June 2005)

Those who didn’t [use the informal economy]... were pushed to the margins of society (Andras, 32, Budapest, August 2004)

Several individuals also explained that they had engaged in the informal economy to secure the well-being of their families, with more than one interviewee quoting the popular communist proverb that ‘he who does not steal from the state steals from his own family’, thus suggesting that they had been willing to sacrifice their own moral integrity to provide for their loved ones.

This ‘survival thesis’ as a rationale to explain or justify the preponderance of economic illegalities during the late socialist period has also been cited by other scholars. Rosner’s study *The Soviet Way of Crime*, based on interviews conducted with Russian émigrés in New York during the 1980s, classified the majority of people she encountered as ‘survivors’ or ‘necessary criminals’ as they rationalised their involvement in the second economy as a means of providing a decent standard of living.²⁷ Rose has also argued that the growth of the informal economy was fuelled by the inefficiency, corruption and general failings of the communist command economy.²⁸

There is considerable evidence to support the claim that people turned to informal supply networks for economic reasons. During the Brezhnev era (1964-1982), it has been estimated that the general cost of living across the East European bloc rose by 55 per cent more than the average increase in wages and by the 1980s the second economy was providing more than one-third of all goods and over half of all essential labour and services in Central Europe.²⁹ The argument that the rapid growth in the second economy during the latter decades of communism was fuelled by increasing economic problems has been well documented in personal testimonies, memoirs and official documentation from this period, with numerous descriptions of production delays, persistent shortages of goods and materials, lengthy waiting lists for a range of consumer goods and services (such as refrigerators, cars or

telephone connections), photographs illustrating long queues for ‘basics’ such as bread, meat and toilet paper outside state stores and descriptions of the many alternative supply and procurement networks that developed outside of the approved state sector. As one Polish citizen remarked during the early 1980s, ‘I never expect to be able to buy anything in state stores. I am actually happy when I find something!’³⁰

However, despite the well documented economic decline of the 1970s and 1980s, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland were far from subsistence economies during this period. Strictly speaking, it was possible to ‘survive’ without engaging in illegal economic exchanges, although this would have been rather a miserable existence! But many researchers have suggested that relative deprivation can act as a sufficiently motivational element to foster deviant behaviour.³¹ Most of my interviewees admitted that they primarily used the second economy to acquire consumer goods and luxury items. This suggests that, certainly in urban areas, many illegal transactions were motivated by ‘greed’ rather than ‘need’ and the desire to improve ones’ living standards and have a ‘nicer life’ within the constraints of the socialist system rather than by survival at any basic level.³²

There are a number of ways in which this ‘survival thesis’ shaped oral testimony. It enabled interviewees to invoke institutional justification for their actions and also influenced their self-representation within their narration, identifying themselves as fundamentally good, honest, individuals who had been trapped in a bad system, emphasising their helplessness, lack of choice and their own lack of accountability.³³ Most of my interviewees referenced institutional (economic) causes above individual agency, often presenting themselves as victims, as the blame for their own criminality was primarily laid at the feet of the state that had failed them. Passerini noted that, ‘a widespread attitude of victimisation can be found in

testimonies of people who lived under totalitarian regimes, expressed by laying the blame on power and on their own hopelessness’, and argues that this should not be surprising because ‘with a coercive ideology comes collusion and implication in the regime’.³⁴ However, narratives that emphasise institutional causes may also obscure individual agency, consciously or unconsciously. Even under totalitarian regimes, it is possible to perceive people as ‘knowing subjects’ who have the capacity to engage with and respond to structures in diverse ways.³⁵

Communal Acceptance of ‘Tolerated Illegalities’: Polish Sociologist Adam Podgrecky coined the term ‘dirty togetherness’ to describe the large scale communal acceptance of the late-socialist informal economy.³⁶ Many of my interviewees also highlighted communal acceptance as an important influence on their actions, emphasising that the ‘petty illegalities’ they engaged in were considered socially acceptable and generally tolerated, even by those in power:

Judging by the law ... we were all criminals back then (Robert, 49, Warsaw July 2004)

Practically everyone I knew used the underground market at that time (Jozsef S, 43, Budapest, August 2004).

The notion of ‘social crime’ – that certain types of criminality may be deemed illegal by the ruling authorities but enjoy widespread communal support or acceptance in practice – is, therefore, a useful concept in understanding the development and workings of the second economy in late-communist Central Europe.³⁷

‘Social’ or ‘customary’ crimes are particularly likely to develop in an environment where the formal legal regulation of ‘acceptable’ behaviour is contested by popular consensus, in which case the majority of people within a particular community may combine actively to foster or simply turn a blind eye to activities which the state authorities regard as criminal but the community themselves do not perceive as immoral or harmful. This likelihood increases in situations where citizens feel high levels of distrust, fear and cynical attitudes towards formal law, making ‘respectable citizens’ more willing to engage in illegal and unfair practices.³⁸ This was certainly the case in late-communist Eastern Europe, where the rule of law was eroded from above as well as below. The subtle re-negotiation of the social contract during the Brezhnev era implicitly decriminalised a wide range of petty economic crimes to ease the failings of command economy and satisfy popular consumption in exchange for general acquiescence to continued communist rule. Millar described how these ‘tolerated illegalities’ would ‘frequently take place in plain view of police, citizens, bureaucrats and high officials’ leading to widespread contempt for the law.³⁹ As Kosztolanyi claimed, under communism, ‘the rule of law was continually undermined by the way the political regime functioned’.⁴⁰

By emphasising high levels of communal complicity in the informal economy, my interviewees were able to present their individual memories as a ‘socially shared’ experience, inhibiting social disapproval, ‘normalising’ their illegal behaviour and justifying their actions on the basis that ‘everyone else was doing it too’. As Kuhn explains, oral narratives allow public and private memories to intertwine, as an individual’s memories ‘extend far beyond the personal ... into an extended network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social and the historical’.⁴¹

Political Protest and Resistance: The communist-era informal economy has also been explained as a means of protest against the regimes in power, ‘a special form of civil disobedience’ and a method of resistance against communism.⁴² Perceiving ‘tolerated illegalities’ as a form of protest and rebellion, providing a measure of ‘popular justice’ in response to unfair or illegitimate oppression, also relates to notions of social crime. Research into eighteenth-century England has depicted a ‘vast, blurred, middle ground between crime and proto-political protest’, fuelled by the exclusion of the masses from political representation and the fact that the ruling class were engaged in exactly the same ‘blurring of the legal boundaries’ themselves.⁴³ Clear parallels can be drawn here with late-socialist era Eastern Europe. However, others disagree with this analysis, arguing the informal economy actually had the opposite effect, acting as a ‘social mollifier’ by channelling potentially dangerous political frustrations into consumerism.⁴⁴

As early as 1959 one report concluded that, ‘the feeling among ordinary people is that it is not immoral to cheat the state’.⁴⁵ It is also significant that throughout the communist bloc the vast majority of petty theft and pilferage targeted state-owned places of employment. This is no doubt explained in part simply by the greater prevalence of goods and materials and in part by the fact that it was easier to dismiss this as a ‘victimless crime’, but may also serve as an indicator of deliberate, targeted protest against the regime. This theory is supported by another common socialist-era proverb: ‘The state robs me and I rob the state, so we both come out even’ (Andras, 32, Budapest, August 2004). In addition, the second economy was not only used to supply everyday goods and services in short supply, but also as a means for people to circumvent state censorship and access ‘anti-socialist’ items that were explicitly prohibited by the regimes, such as western music, anti-communist propaganda and dissident literature.

During my interviews, several individuals mentioned using the informal economy as a form of ‘resistance’ against communist oppression, characterising their involvement as ‘a way to fight back’ (Kryzstof, 36, Warsaw, July 2004) and ‘a way to get one over on the communists’ (Alexey, 31, Prague, June 2005). Six of the people I spoke to claimed to have used the underground market to obtain recorded copies of western music prohibited by state censors, three to acquire dissident literature and one to purchase Levi jeans. However, the overall impression I received suggested that, for most people, political protest appears to have come a distant second to that of economic advantage. At best, the second economy seems to have represented a rather ambivalent form of opposition, functioning primarily as a solution to economic dissatisfaction rather than any concerted, political strategy of protest or resistance towards the regimes in power. It is also worth considering that claims of ‘resistance’ could also be magnified by individuals to detract from their previous acquiescence to communist rule. As Passerini argued, admissions of conformity or passive acceptance by those who have lived under ‘coercive ideologies’ such as communism ‘may not sit comfortably’ with their present (post-communist) sense of self.⁴⁶

Popular Morality:

Widespread acceptance and tolerance of informal and illegal activities can also provide useful insights into the moral state of a particular society’.⁴⁷ The prevalence of the informal economy appears to have had a significant impact on shaping popular morality in late socialist Central Europe. As legality and morality increasingly diverged, a series of ‘moral guidelines’ evolved to regulate the ambiguous ‘grey area’ occupied by the informal economy. For example, while ‘stealing from the state’ was broadly considered as acceptable, stealing

from a fellow citizen was overwhelmingly viewed as unacceptable and subjected to popular condemnation.⁴⁸ As one of my interviewees explained:

Ok ... from the strict legal point of view, I suppose there's not much difference between a 'thief' and one who simply 'takes something home' from work. But for us, there was a marked distinction ... one could never 'take away' something from a private home, not even a stranger's. *That* would have been theft (Sabine, 40, Warsaw, July 2004).

Interestingly, many individuals also distinguished between their own personal involvement in the informal economy and the activities of those they perceived as 'the real criminals', such as corrupt state authorities and professional underground market dealers.⁴⁹ A couple of interviewees expressed the sentiment that 'the real criminals back then were the ones in power' (Magda, 51, Warsaw, July 2004 and Andras, 32, Budapest, August 2004), with the Communist Party referred to as a 'mafia' (Miroslaw, 37, Warsaw, July 2004). People were also keen to differentiate their motivations and behaviour from those of professional criminals and large-scale underground market suppliers. As Wedel noted, 'A *spekulant* is often looked down upon, but one who buys goods from him for socially accepted ends is not'.⁵⁰ This is also something that was confirmed in my interviews:

We knew who the real suppliers where ... who to go to, where and when, for certain things. But we didn't really like to associate with them ... They [underground marketers] were the real criminals and they effectively robbed us too! We were just doing what we had to, to get by (Petra, 44, Prague, June 2005).

Karstedt and Farrall argue that the ‘normalisation’ of illegal activities as socially acceptable activities or ‘everyday crimes’ during the latter decades of communism enabled individuals to ‘discuss justifications and techniques of committing crimes ... with considerable ease, creating a moral climate that encourages such types of behaviour’.⁵¹ On a surface level, my interviewees defended the prevalence of the communist informal economy as normal and morally acceptable. One respondent noted that, ‘these “crimes” were normal behaviour. We had no real feelings of embarrassment or shame. Few people even thought about the morality or ethics involved’ (Jozsef S, 43, Budapest, August 2004). Another simply stated that, ‘Back then, few people could afford to have high moral principles’ (Ewa, 36, Warsaw, July 2004).

However, there is evidence to suggest that the psychological impact of ‘tolerated illegalities’ in central Europe was more complicated. As Wedel noted, an admission of participation in the informal economy tended to evoke feelings of both pride and shame in individuals; ‘pride in having ingeniously gamed the system [but] shame in having lowered oneself to do so’.⁵² Janos Kenedi also describes how he experienced an internal struggle between ‘moral reluctance and economic well-being’. While he was initially ashamed of his mother’s willingness to use her ‘backdoor connections’ to acquire scarce goods and critical of the gulf that existed between ‘economic laws and public morals’ in communist Hungary, he realised that he must also be prepared to compromise his ‘moral superiority’ to attain a decent standard of living after he was cheated by someone over the sale of his flat.⁵³

During the latter decades of communist rule the second economy became so extensive that it spawned its own distinct vocabulary, culture and etiquette. While cold, hard, cash-based corruption did exist, at lower levels much of the informal economy operated around a mutual exchange of favours, further blurring the lines of illegality and morality. Kenedi recounts

‘navigating the thickets of corruption and influence’ to acquire the requisite products for his house build, being prepared, where appropriate, to ‘slip a few banknotes into a greasy palm’ but also describing how the informal economy was carefully regulated by rules of social etiquette: “‘I should be *very* grateful”, I say to the shop assistant. I can’t just say “here’s a hundred””.⁵⁴ Wedel also emphasised the importance of informal etiquette: ‘Money must be offered with the greatest of care. The party proposing it must emphasise that it has nothing in common with a bribe. It is “gratuitous” or un-remunerated’.⁵⁵

Many ‘petty illegalities’ were essentially ‘de-criminalised’ by popular discourse, and my interviewees tended to speak using the imprecise and ambiguous expressions that were generally used to refer to informal economic activity. Rather than stealing people spoke of ‘acquiring’ or ‘getting’ items; rather than bribery they talked about giving ‘gifts’, ‘tokens’, ‘gratuities’ or ‘thanksgiving money’ and rather than illegal economic exchange people spoke about ‘settling’ or ‘arranging’ matters.⁵⁶ The psychological impact that this expression had was illustrated by one Polish woman, who remembered how, during the communist era: ‘[the payment of gratuities] was more on the level of a kind of mutual goodwill, a kind of assistance, while “bribe” was an ugly word and refers to an ugly business’.⁵⁷ Using this vocabulary implicitly helped people mentally to ‘de-criminalise’ their involvement in such activities and ‘normalise’ their behaviour, both internally and in the eyes of their social peers. Fifteen years later, it also enabled my interviewees psychologically to distance themselves from their own illegal conduct, verbalising their ‘crimes’ without directly confronting the illegality of their actions.

Conclusion:

Although communist propaganda frequently claimed that crime rates in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland were negligible, the evidence suggests that during the latter decades of communist rule increasing numbers of citizens were turning to the informal economy where they were engaging in a range of ‘petty illegalities’ including petty theft, underground market trading, bribery and corruption. These activities were officially prohibited, but in practice they were widely accepted and tolerated, both by ordinary citizens and state authorities. Personal memoirs and oral testimonies provide a valuable resource for historians, helping to bridge the gap between propaganda and reality and providing interesting insights into popular perceptions of the informal economy.

The dominant discourse to emerge from the oral interviews I conducted was economic. The vast majority of interviewees cited relative deprivation and the desire to achieve a better standard of living for themselves and their families as the primary factor that had motivated their involvement in the informal economy, although the tendency to blame institutional failings for their former actions could also be perceived as a way to reduce their individual accountability. Wider communal complicity in these ‘tolerated illegalities’ was also clearly considered to be an important factor. Presenting the informal economy as a socially shared experience implied moral reinforcement, justification and communal support for individual involvement. While a small number of interviewees also discussed the informal economy in terms of political protest and resistance to communist-era repression, this argument was much more ambivalent.

Many interviewees also emphasised the ‘normalisation’ of their involvement in the informal economy, but there was some evidence of deeper cognitive dissonance. Karstedt and Farrall suggest that, ‘even if unscrupulous and unfair behaviour appears to be “normal” it is still seen

by most offenders and victims as behaviour in need of proper justification'.⁵⁸ This can be seen in attempts to 'decriminalise' the informal economy through language, social etiquette and popular morality, coping mechanisms designed to minimise culpability by repressing, neutralising or distancing individual agency. The result was the production of a complex and richly textured analysis of petty criminality and popular morality in late-communist central Europe.

¹ P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 67.

² A few notable examples include: O. Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, London: Penguin, 2008 and accompanying website <http://www.orlandofiges.com/whisperers.php>; A. Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall*, London: Granta, 2003; P. Molloy, *The Lost World of Communism: An Oral History of Everyday Life Behind the Iron Curtain*, London: BBC Books, 2009; L. Passerini (ed.), *Memory and Totalitarianism*, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009; and S. Shapiro with R. Shapiro, *The Curtain Rises: Oral Histories of the Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co., 2004.

³ For example, the brave work documenting the human rights abuses and repression of the Stalinist-era by the Russian organisation *Memorial* (<http://www.memo.ru/eng/>); recording the memories and personal stories of those sentenced to the Soviet Gulag camps by the *European Memories of the Gulag* (<http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/thematique>) and the recent project by *Europeana 1989* to collect personal stories and document material culture about the revolutions of 1989 (<http://www.europeana1989.eu/en/>).

⁴ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 94; see also R. Fraser, *Blood of Spain: an Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, London: Pimlico, 1994, p. 39.

⁵ L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 34-5.

⁶ This aspect is widely discussed in the literature. See, for example: R. Grele (ed.), *Envelopes of Sound: the Art of Oral History*, New York: Greenwood, 1991, p. 245; J. Laub, 'Talking about Crime: Oral History in Criminology and Criminal Justice', *Oral History Review*, no. 1, vol. 12, 1984, pp. 29-42; and A. Thomson, 'Unreliable Memories? The Use and Abuse of Oral History', in W. Lamont (ed.), *Historical Controversies and Historians*, London: UCL Press, 1998, pp. 23-34.

⁷ Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, p. xv.

⁸ See Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 6-7; Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*, p. 115; D. Dunaway, 'Transcription: Shadow or Reality?', *Oral History Review*, no. 1, vol. 12, 1984, p. 116; A. Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different?', in A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 50; S. Schragar, 'What is Social in Oral History?', *International Journal of Oral History*, no. 2, vol. 4, 1983, p. 77; Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 162.

⁹ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 6, 16-18, 22, 107

¹⁰ C. Borland, "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research', in S. Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 63.

¹¹ G. Grossman, 'Subverted Sovereignty: Historic Role of the Soviet Underground', in S. Cohen, A. Schwartz and J. Zysman (eds), *The Tunnel at the End of the Light: Privatization, Business Networks and Economic Transformation in Russia*, GAIA Research Series, 100, University of California, Berkeley, January 1998, available online: <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/1wg9h2w2>; M. Los, *The Second Economy in Marxist States*, London: Macmillan, 1990, p. 36.

¹² V. Hanzl, M. Severova, V. Stepova and J. Zurek, 'Problem nejen moralni, ale i ekonomicky' ['The Problem is not only Moral, but Economic'], *Hospodarske Noviny*, 20 January 1989, pp. 8-9

¹³ Statistics compiled by the Polish Statistical Office (1984) cited in J. Wedel, *The Private Poland*, Oxford: Facts on File, 1986, p. 65. Figures from the Hungarian Economic Research Institute, published in *Magyar Hirlap*, 22 February 1985: RFE/RL 10/16, 6 April 1985, p. 30.

¹⁴ See, for example, Grossman, 'Subverted Sovereignty', and J. Clark and A. Wildarsky, 'Why Communism Collapses: the Moral and Material Failures of Communism are Intertwined', *Journal of Public Policy*, no. 4, vol. 10, 1990, pp. 361-90 .

¹⁵ Shapiro with Shapiro, *Curtain Rises*, pp.17, 127.

¹⁶ J. Kenedi, *Do It Yourself: Hungary's Hidden Economy*, London: Pluto Press, 1981, p. 11.

¹⁷ Wedel, *Private Poland*.

¹⁸ D. Gadd, S. Karstedt and S. Messner, *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*, London: Sage, 2012, p. 166; see also J. Bennett, *Oral History and Delinquency: the Rhetoric of Criminology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

¹⁹ This comment is taken from an email exchange which took place in May 2004 with an individual who was still employed by state law enforcement and involved with fighting contemporary organised crime at a fairly senior level.

²⁰ The Provisional IRA admitted responsibility for the murder of Jean McConville in a 1999 statement. Researchers at Boston College initially appealed against the 2011 court ruling, arguing that they held a duty of care towards their interviewees, as releasing their testimony to police could lead to other activists perceiving them as 'touts' (informants), which could have dangerous, life threatening consequences. However, the transfer of a number of key interviews was subsequently agreed. Disclosures from the Belfast Project interviews led to the March 2014 arrest of Ivor Bell, former IRA Chief of Staff, who has been formally

charged with aiding and abetting in the murder of Jean McConville. Several other individuals have also been arrested for questioning on the basis of the Belfast College interviews, including Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams (May 2014), who was later released without charge. The remaining interviews are currently locked away in a vault in the Boston College Library. However, the project remains shrouded in controversy and a number of participants have now requested the return of their recordings. For a brief overview of some of the key issues see J. Neuenschwander, 'Major Legal Challenges Facing Oral History in the Digital Age', in D. Boyd, S. Cohen, B. Rakerd and D. Rehberger (eds), *Oral History in the Digital Age*, Washington, DC: Institute of Library and Museum Services, 2012. Available online: <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/major-legal-challenges/> and B Mucmurtrie, 'Secrets from Belfast', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2014. Available online: <http://chronicle.com/article/Secrets-from-Belfast/144059/>

²¹ For example, all communist bloc countries prohibited 'speculation' (selling of goods for private profit), an activity which formed an integral part of the informal economy but which is no longer considered a crime today.

²² Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 10.

²³ Wedel, *Private Poland*, pp. 20-22

²⁴ Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, p. x.

²⁵ A. Portelli, 'There's Gonna Always Be a Line: History Telling as a Multi-Vocal Art', in A. Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, p. 27.

²⁶ All 38 interviewees referenced declining economic conditions when asked to outline the key reasons explaining the rapid growth of the second economy during the latter decades of communism; 27 people directly blamed their own personal engagement in illegal economic

activities on economic problems and 14 people directly used the term ‘survival’ when discussing their rationale.

²⁷ L. Rosner, *The Soviet Way of Crime: Beating the System in the Soviet Union and the USA*, Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1986.

²⁸ R. Rose, ‘How Russians Cope: Living in an Anti-Modern Society’, *East European Constitutional Review*, no. 2, vol. 8, 1999, pp. 68-75.

²⁹ T. Bauer, ‘A Note on Money and the Consumer in Eastern Europe’, *Soviet Studies*, no. 3, vol. 35, 1983, p. 282; J. Bugajski and M. Pollack, *East European Fault Lines: Dissent, Opposition and Social Activism*, London: Westview Press, 1989, p. 179.

³⁰ Wedel, *Private Poland*, p. 55.

³¹ R. Merton, ‘Social Structure and Anomie’, *American Sociological Review*, no. 5, vol. 3, 1938, pp. 672- 82. See also C. Lopes, ‘Consumer Morality in Times of Economic Hardship: Evidence from the European Social Survey’, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, no. 2, vol. 34, 2010, p. 115.

³² However, it is worth noting that this ‘survival thesis’ may have had more of a literal application in isolated rural areas, where underground trading and bartering at rural markets ensured the exchange of basic foodstuffs and livestock, and with regard to the need for additional ‘informal’ payments to ensure timely and professional treatment in the notoriously corrupt communist health service. For more information, see Bugajski and Pollack, *East European Fault Lines*, p. 183, and Wedel, *Private Poland*, pp. 54, 101.

³³ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 41.

³⁴ Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, p. x.

³⁵ S. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject*, London: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 108.

³⁶ A. Podgorecki, *Polish Society*, London: Praeger, 1994, p. 50.

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- ³⁷ The concept of ‘social banditry’ was first defined by Eric Hobsbawm in his books *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th Century*, London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1965, and *Bandits*, London: Abacus, 2001. Hobsbawm argued that certain types of criminality were conceived as methods of rebellion, resistance or collective survival strategies. His ideas sparked fierce academic debate, but remain widely referenced by historians of crime. Foucault also wrote about the existence of ‘tolerated’ or ‘popular’ illegalities’ in M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, London: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 82.
- ³⁸ J. Lea, ‘Social Crime Revisited’, *Theoretical Criminology*, no. 3, vol. 3, 1999, pp. 307-25; S. Karstedt and S. Farrall, ‘The Moral Economy of Everyday Crime: Markets, Consumers and Citizens’, *British Journal of Criminology*, no. 6, vol. 46, 2006, p. 1011; T. Bark, ‘Crime Becomes Custom – Custom Becomes Crime’, available online: <http://www.bunker8.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/history/trevor.htm>
- ³⁹ J. Millar, ‘The Little Deal: Brezhnev’s Contribution to Acquisitive Socialism’, *Slavic Review*, no. 4, vol. 44, 1985, p. 703.
- ⁴⁰ G. Kosztolanyi, *Greasing the Wheels*, Budapest: Central Europe Review Ltd, 2000, p. 6.
- ⁴¹ A. Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 4.
- ⁴² J. Kornai, *The Road to a Free Economy. Shifting From a Socialist System: the Example of Hungary*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1990, p.40; A. Korbonski , ‘The “Second Economy” in Poland’, *Journal of International Affairs*, no. 1, vol. 35, 1981, pp. 1-15.
- ⁴³ Lea, ‘Social Crime Revisited’.
- ⁴⁴ See, for example, S. Sampson, ‘The Second Economy of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe’, *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 1, vol. 493, 1987, p. 120.
- ⁴⁵ A. Rosenthal, ‘Thievery Plagues Eastern Europe’, *New York Times*, 3 February 1959.
- ⁴⁶ Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, p. x.

⁴⁷ Karstedt and Farrall, 'Moral Economy', p. 1012.

⁴⁸ This distinction was confirmed by interviewees and is also discussed by E. Firlit and J. Cholopecski, 'When Theft is Not Theft', in J. Wedel, *The Unplanned Society: Poland During and After Communism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, pp. 95-109.

⁴⁹ Other studies have also concluded that a large amount of activity conducted within the informal economy involves individuals who perceive themselves, and are generally perceived by others, as 'respectable citizens' rather than as 'criminals' per se. See, for example, Karstedt and Farrall, 'Moral Economy', pp. 1011-36, and C. Lopes, 'Consumer Morality in Times of Economic Hardship: Evidence from the European Social Survey', *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, no. 2, vol. 34, 2010, pp. 112-20.

⁵⁰ Wedel, *Private Poland*, p. 61.

⁵¹ Karstedt and Farrall, 'Moral Economy', pp. 1011-12.

⁵² J. Wedel, *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government and the Free Market*, New York: Basic Books, 2009, p. 53.

⁵³ Kenedi, *Do It Yourself*, p.11.

⁵⁴ Kenedi, *Do It Yourself*, pp.75, 79-80.

⁵⁵ Wedel, *Private Poland*, p. 46

⁵⁶ See also W. Pawlik, 'Intimate Commerce', in J. Wedel, *The Unplanned Society: Poland During and After Communism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Pawlik, 'Intimate Commerce', p. 93.

⁵⁸ Karstedt and Farrall, 'Moral Economy', p. 1013.