

ORAL HISTORIES OF FORMER UKRAINIAN OSTARBEITER

Preliminary Results of Analysis

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By 1939, over 20 million (or 80 per cent of) Ukrainians lived within the borders of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine. Seven million lived in Polish-held Galicia and Volhynia, while others were under Hungarian control after the March 1939 annexation of the Subcarpathian Rus.¹ According to the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, concluded in August 1939, Western Ukraine (along with Western Byelorussia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Bessarabia) was to be handed over to the Soviets. The consequence of this pact for Ukrainians was to assign about 4.5 million Western Ukrainians, most of whom had previously lived under Polish rule, to the Soviet Union in the form of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine.² During the Second World War Ukraine was the largest Soviet republic to be fully occupied by the Germans and was held under German control longer than the occupied areas of Russia. There were four zones of occupation in Ukraine: the district of Galicia as a part of the Polish Government General (western territories of today's Ukraine), the Reich Commissariat of Ukraine (central territories of today's Ukraine), and the so-called military zone of occupation (eastern territories of today's Ukraine). A small part of Southwest Ukraine was divided between the Romanian governorships of Transnistria and Bessarabia in 1941. In the course of the conflict 6.8 million Ukrainian civilians were killed and a

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further 1.4 million military personnel either perished at the front or died as prisoners of war.³ According to estimates made in the Soviet Union in 1945–1948, 2.4 million people were sent to forced labour in Germany from the territory of contemporary Ukraine.⁴ They constituted the largest group and one of those with fewest rights among all foreign labourers who worked in the Reich.

Before initiating hostilities and during the first months of the Blitzkrieg push of the Wehrmacht through Soviet territory and specifically through Ukraine, the German military authorities had not planned to use the labour force of the occupied territories in the Reich economy. The idea of mass mobilisation of manpower occurred only when the initial Blitzkrieg turned into a sustained war of position, and was eventually formulated in autumn 1941 by Göring's well-known directive of 7 November, which outlined the legal status of civilian workers from occupied regions of the Soviet Union.

A large-scale campaign to recruit volunteers in Central and Eastern Ukraine started in January 1942 and covered the leading industrial centres of this region – the cities of Kharkov, Stalino (Donetsk), Dnepropetrovsk and Kiev. The first train, carrying 1,117 volunteer skilled workers, set out from Kharkov for Cologne on 18 January 1942.⁵ On 22 January, a solemn ceremony was held at the departure of a transport with 1,500 volunteers from Kiev,⁶ and two days later, a train with 1,142 metalworkers left Kharkov for Brandenburg.⁷ The situation was different in Galicia, which after joining the Government General fell within the terms of reference of the labour legislation for occupied Poland, and from which, after 27 November 1941, 60,709 people left for work in Germany.⁸

After the Nazi authorities had approved the position of General Plenipotentiary for Labour Allocation and appointed Fritz Sauckel to it, the tasks of recruiting commissions widened considerably. From this moment on, not only highly skilled workers but also ordinary townspeople and – starting from spring 1942 – inhabitants of rural villages were also to be sent to forced labour. The mobilisation thus lost its voluntary nature at the outset. Until the last days of the occupation of Ukraine, the civilian population's departure for work in Germany was involuntary in its character, form and organisation. The occupying forces proceeded (1) by posting orders (which were handed over to a future *Ostarbeiter* and required him or her to come at a specified time to a certain point to be later transported to Germany); (2) through round-ups or raids (which were carried out mainly in large cities and had various purposes, including fulfilment of labour mobilisation quotas); and (3) by selecting people for forced labour during evacuations from the combat zone.

In the Reich territory, the Ukrainian forced labourers – *Ostarbeiter* – worked in all fields and spheres where the labour of foreign civilian work-

ers was used: in plants and factories, railways and construction companies, in agriculture and domestic service. Liberated in 1945 by Soviet or Allied forces, they waited to be sent home for several months, meanwhile passing long-term checks at the Soviet control filtration points, filtration camps and other checkpoints. After this, men of conscription age often joined the Red Army, and women worked in various military detachments for periods of one month to half a year; they were deployed, among other things, to dismantle German industrial and agricultural equipment and other valuable materials and transport them to the USSR.

The complicated stories and damaged lives of these people remained outside of both public attention and scholarly interest in the USSR for many postwar decades. This was because the memory of forced labour in Nazi Germany did not fit within the triumphalist narrative of Soviet history, with its rhetorical emphasis on the mass heroism and patriotism of Soviet citizens; labour in the enemy's territory and for the enemy's benefit could not be excused even by its forced nature. The only stories that were legitimate in this context were stories of resistance, whether organised – within the framework of an international anti-fascist movement – or spontaneous but deliberate, as in the case of sabotage carried out mainly at industrial workplaces. In turn, in academic research produced during the Soviet epoch, the forced labour of the USSR's civilian population was treated as one of many Nazi crimes perpetrated in the occupied territories, and was commonly reduced solely to an episode of forced mobilisation. It is no wonder that in postwar Soviet historiography there existed not a single thematic monograph dedicated to comprehensive research into the history of forced labour, let alone to the analysis of the experiences and life stories of people who had worked in Germany under compulsion during the war years.

With the breakdown of the Communist regimes and the dissolution of the USSR, sustained interest in this problem gradually developed in the national historiographies of the former Soviet republics. A substantial number of previously unknown (and often secret) documents became available to scholars, and many studies were produced. Not the least important feature of this development has been a dialogue between historians and ordinary people who lived through the historical events, which has begun only recently and would have been inconceivable in the preceding Communist epoch. Along with other oral history studies, the life-history interviews in the International Slave and Forced Labourers Documentation Project are not only shocking evidence in the investigation of the most complicated and contradictory event in twentieth-century history – the Second World War, which is not losing its relevance – but also a unique monument to the ordinary person's role and place in history.

Our group conducted interviews in Central, Eastern and Southern Ukraine, excluding the Crimean peninsula. Half of the interviews were recorded in towns and cities, the other half in district centres and villages. Of the 40 interviews we carried out, 23 were with women and 17 with men. The average age of the interviewees was 83; the majority of them were born between 1924 and 1926 and thus belonged to the age cohort most massively mobilised for forced labour. The oldest woman we interviewed was 92 years old (born in 1914); the youngest, a man born in 1937, was deported to forced labour in Germany together with his family and worked cleaning the labour camp, streets and a railway station in Berlin. Three more informants, born in 1929, 1933 and 1935, were taken to Germany as children.

Ethnic identity did not necessarily correspond to the language of the interview (one quarter of the interviews were recorded in Russian): 32 out of 40 interviewees considered themselves to be Ukrainians and 8 to be Russians. Among our informants' parents there were two ethnic Germans and two ethnic Poles. As for religious identity, all the former *Ostarbeiter* interviewed by us grew up under the official atheism of the Soviet Union, which certainly influenced their religious identification. Almost all of them called themselves Orthodox Christians, but few of the interviewees strictly follow religious observances, go to church regularly or otherwise behave religiously. Several informants for whom the question of faith is vital became 'active believers' only in their old age. The exception includes two interviewees who were brought up in Baptist families and have considered themselves Baptists all their lives.

The majority of the *Ostarbeiter* interviewed by us was born and grew up in the countryside, in traditional peasant families of the early 1920s. People with social origins in working-class families were much rarer, and hardly anybody came from a white-collar family. It is important to note that a great number of respondents lost close relatives in their childhood or early teens, i.e. before the war began – most often as a result of the famine of 1933 or repressions and executions in the 1930s. The war brought further blows; every one of our interviewees had family members who either did not come back from the front or died in an occupied town or village.

Of the 40 people interviewed, 11 have higher education (one who holds a doctorate in geography changed his surname in his youth and has concealed the fact of his stay in Germany all his life). The others have full or partial secondary education, i.e. seven, eight or ten years of schooling. Three of those interviewed have primary education, i.e. four years of schooling. However, these figures are not representative of the level of education of former *Ostarbeiter* in general. Other sources show that only 3 per cent of former *Ostarbeiter* have had higher education, whereas in our selection the share is approximately 25 per cent.⁹

In analysing interviews with former forced labourers, it is appropriate to address two main issues: the problem of studying the practice of forcing people to labour and the problem of studying the experience of being forced to labour. When studying the practice of forced labour as a wartime phenomenon, a researcher is principally interested in gathering otherwise inaccessible or insufficient information on the transportation of workers to Germany, on working and living conditions, on the reward and punishment system, on liberation and the way home etc. In this case, the nature of the information is largely supplementary and illustrative in relation to written sources. When studying the experience of being forced to labour, a different complex of issues is of interest. The object of research in this case is a narrative itself (more precisely, the transcript or recording), and the subject is the system of relations and regularities that structure the narrative. For example, how does an interviewee inscribe the experience of carrying out forced labour into the overall structure of his (her) autobiography, or where, at which moment and using what means does the narrator articulate and thereby transmit this experience? Which elements of the experience being transmitted and its rationale are positioned and articulated in terms of the official discourse, and which of them bespeak a personal interpretation? Which temporal and topical patterns do respondents select to integrate and align the life experience that is important for their biographies within the framework of a single narrative? And finally, which strategies of self-representation do they use in their autobiographical narratives? In view of the limited space available here, these questions will be answered briefly, in the form of theses.

Studies of the Practice of Forcing People to Labour

Deportation to Germany

All our informants claim they were taken to Germany by force. The overwhelming majority were deported in the spring and summer of 1942, a few people were taken in spring 1943. Two of our informants attempted to escape on the way to Germany but were caught and transported to forced labour. Transportation was carried out by rail; future *Ostarbeiter* went to the distribution camps in cattle cars, where there was nothing but the floor, ceiling and walls. They were taken by different means from the distribution camps to their places of deployment – by train, cart, bicycle and on foot.

Place of Work in Germany

The number of former *Ostarbeiter* working in any given economic sector or form of labour turned out to be difficult to calculate, as about ten in-

interviewees either changed their place and type of work (were taken from factories and plants to work as servants, or conversely were transferred to factories or plants from farmsteads), or combined several types of work (for example, during the week they worked at a factory and on weekends on a farm or in a household). Therefore, both in questionnaires and in this chapter we cite the number working in this or that sector in terms of the categories of postwar compensation payments. That is, if a former *Ostarbeiter* was paid compensation as a worker in the industrial sector, even if he or she worked on an agricultural farm for some time, we categorise this case as industrial work. Thus, among the 40 former *Ostarbeiter* interviewed, 20 worked in the industrial sector of the Nazi economy (including two in mines, one on the railway and one in road repairs managed by the Organisation Todt), 11 in agriculture, 4 in domestic service, 1 in the hotel business and 1 in the port of Hamburg. Three of the interviewees were children under ten during their stay in Germany; they had to work mostly cleaning the camp, streets and railway stations. Six people carried out slave labour in concentration camp work details.

Information on the Stay in Germany

In their stories concerning their stay in Germany the witnesses first of all emphasised the aspects of their new surroundings that were extraordinary for them, regardless of whether this 'new' experience was positively or negatively perceived. Industrial sector workers began their stories with the living conditions (description of the camp, barracks etc.). Those who worked in agriculture began the story with the description of the farm and the working schedule; living conditions were described later. We will not dwell on their memories of the appearance of camps, barracks, farmsteads and houses now, but will merely emphasise the following. If a former *Ostarbeiter* was born and grew up in a village, he or she perceived and described his or her work on a German farm as habitual and familiar, comparing with interest the crops cultivated, methods of farm management and organisation of agricultural production at large. In other words, love for the land and the habit of working on the land (in prewar Ukrainian villages children started to help with work as early as age six or seven), formed by the time of deportation to Germany, considerably facilitated adaptation to forced labour in agriculture for this group of people and also mitigated the intensity of the identity crisis all former forced labourers suffered from.

In this context, one of our last narratives recorded as a video interview is characteristic. In it a former *Ostarbeiter* talks about the reason for his escape from railway works. He escaped twice, with the result that he was imprisoned in Buchenwald concentration camp, from which he

was liberated in the spring of 1945. The reason he gave for his escape attempts was not a desire to get home or 'to friends' but the wish to change his employment – to get to a 'master', to farm work, for, as he repeatedly said, he loved to work on the land and wanted to work – as long as it was on the land.

Where *Ostarbeiter* had been punished in concentration and labour camps, they described their work previous to the places of imprisonment briefly and schematically in the first, open, part of the interview, highlighting only the motives for the actions that had led to their punishment. The living conditions and work before their internment in the concentration camp were just an introduction to the story of the hardest ordeal of their lives.

Repression and Punishments

Among the kinds of punishment they suffered, our informants reported fines, discipline restrictions (for example, a prohibition on leaving the camp grounds), imprisonment or transfer to a labour or disciplinary camp. Many of them witnessed beatings imposed by camp administration or their masters. Among the former *Ostarbeiter* themselves beating was used much less often. There were also those who never mentioned beating or humiliation either of themselves or of others, but such cases are few. Incidents of beatings were recalled as taking place both during the stay in Germany and at the point of selection for deportation, as well as during transportation, examination and 'disinfection' in transit camps. Some women tell of beatings and humiliation, including multiple rapes by Soviet soldiers; in one interview a beating by American soldiers is mentioned. Among the reasons for imprisonment in concentration camps, attempts to escape from the workplace are most prominent, followed by refusal to work or conscious sabotage. In the only case we encountered of a woman being interned in a concentration camp, it was the result of her letters to a friend in which she wrote carelessly both about the camp administration and about Nazi Germany in general.

Coming Back to the Homeland

Working in different regions of Germany, our informants were liberated by the Soviet troops as well as by the Western Allies. Memories of liberation by Soviet soldiers are reported in joyful and enthusiastic tones in the interviews of those who were taken as children to labour in Germany. Those who were older characterise their feelings and the events connected with the liberation by Soviet troops differently, describing both joy and the above mentioned shock and indignation at the soldiers' bru-

tality. Those who were liberated by American troops most often speak about the fact that they saw black soldiers for the first time in their lives; they also recollect with pleasure the generous American food rations. There are also stories about meetings with American soldiers who were ethnic Ukrainians.

As to the postwar lives of our informants and the impact of their stay in Germany, we find both stories of lifelong concealment of this biographical fact and assurances from informants that they had not concealed anything from anybody, and that forced labour in Germany did not influence their later life in any way. The absence of repression or need for concealment is especially characteristic of interviewees from a rural background, who returned to their own village or settlement where they had been known since childhood and continued working in agriculture without being harassed by the authorities. By contrast, those who decided to settle in cities faced certain restrictions, be it non-admission to postgraduate studies or rejection for employment in large, especially military enterprises.

Studies of the Experience of Forced Labour

It is obvious that each personal story recorded within the framework of the project is unique, as unique as every individual's life. However, analysing the forced labour experience in Nazi Germany during the Second World War, we can group these widely different 'life stories' according to certain criteria, such as, for example, strategies of self-representation and 'formulas' for inscribing the forced labour experience into the overall autobiographical narrative, or the use of hackneyed phrases, clichés and metaphors of the official discourse vs. personal interpretations. What follows is a summary of some results of our analysis of the strategies of self-representation within the framework of our informants' autobiographical constructs and of the spaces in these constructs which are filled by the narrative of forced labour in Nazi Germany.

An analysis of our informants' autobiographical constructs reveals three main strategies of self-representation used by former Ukrainian *Ostarbeiter*. The first is a strategy of 'compliance' with the codes and standards of Soviet society and with the official version of the war generally accepted in that society. In the compliance strategy, the interviewee rarely returns to the subject of forced labour after having once described it in the context of the relevant topical block. This experience is not determinative for the subsequent life practices of the informants. Their life is 'normal', 'like everybody's'. In their autobiographical narratives, this group of people pays more attention to stories of their families, work,

various life successes and hardships. In turn, they successfully 'inscribe' a narrative of their period of forced labour into the official Soviet account of the war as a whole and into the Soviet version of the history of forced labour in particular – that is, into the approved narrative of resistance outlined above. Here we refer to narratives of obligatory – though minimal and insignificant – sabotage that former *Ostarbeiter* tried to commit while working in industrial enterprises, in construction and other organisations. This 'deliberate sabotage' (including disobedience or demonstrative violation of discipline of different kinds) was not necessarily followed by punishment. In these cases, the main thing is a desire to show oneself at all costs as a fighter and protester rather than a passive and silent 'slave'.

In the event of work in agriculture or domestic service, where former *Ostarbeiter* were very closely associated with their 'masters' (unlike large enterprises where the 'master' was often depersonalised and/or was represented by the German state as a whole), the narrative of resistance took a different form. Here, we discovered two strategies: inversion or levelling of the power relations inherent in the 'master–forced labourer' binary opposition. Both of these strategies are implemented when former *Ostarbeiter* present themselves as equal or even superior to their masters in knowledge, skills or experience. Thus, for example, we recorded narratives of friendly relations between young Ukrainian female workers and their mistresses, of 'transfer of experience' in farm management and of the communication of vital practical knowledge and skills from *Ostarbeiter* to their masters, as well as episodes of protecting their masters from arbitrary actions by the liberators – namely Red Army soldiers. However, it is important to note that the Soviet narrative of resistance implied resistance to the enemy proper, the unambiguously and explicitly negative Nazi. The possibility of attributing positive characteristics to both ordinary German people and the 'masters' themselves (including cases when they needed to be 'protected') appears to be a feature of a contemporary, i.e. post-Communist, understanding of the problem, for which ambiguity and the absence of fixed ideological stereotypes are typical.

The next strategy of self-representation is that of self-acquittal through accusation, where the narrator strives to acquit himself (or herself), in the eyes of society and the state, of an act of 'betrayal' that he (she) committed unwillingly and under compulsion by working on the territory of the enemy state. In this case, the theme of forced labour resounds throughout the biography as meaningful and determinative for the whole subsequent life experience, and the former *Ostarbeiter* positions himself (herself) not as a fighter but rather as a victim – of circumstances, of the aggressive policy of both the totalitarian states that triggered the war and of the later policy of the Soviet state towards *Ostarbeiter*. This strategy is most apparent in people with a passive life situation, whose personal or professional

life was not a success, and who attribute all their hardships or frustrations specifically to the fact that they were detained in Nazi Germany as forced labourers. By contrast with the group described above, these informants' accounts are characterised by extremely negative assessments of all Germans, the use of stock phrases and fixed discursive structures from the Soviet era ('Nazi fiends', 'torturers', 'murderers', 'beasts'), and a brief and telegraphic style of retelling the experience of their sojourn in Germany and its lengthiness throughout the interview. This is most likely related to the fact that this experience was too painful for this group of people, and the trauma of the violence exercised against them by the Nazi state was aggravated by similarly traumatic restrictions, contempt and neglect on the part of the Soviet state that they have not been able to overcome in the course of their lives.

There is also a diametrically opposed strategy that we might call 'protest socialisation'. In this strategy, an individual positions him/herself as a socially active person and tries to minimise the impact of the forced labour experience on his (her) whole life, while at the same time perceiving this period as significant for his (her) fate. This strategy is typical for people who in one way or another protested against the system of constraints imposed by Soviet society on the professional and personal development of those who had worked on German territory during the war. This system included, among other things, secret instructions declaring marriage with former *Ostarbeiter* undesirable, restricted access to education and employment, and a prohibition on individuals who had been taken for forced labour at the age of over eighteen returning to live in large cities, all of which were in force during the first postwar years. 'Protest socialisation' implies persistent struggle to implement one's own life plans (which often seemed ambitious to people around them) through a permanent search for ways to evade existing prohibitions. These included a change of surname, nondisclosure of the fact of forced labour in Germany at marriage and when seeking employment, the use of various tricks when passing checkpoints, etc. It should be noted that, like the 'compliant group', this group of informants placed the topical block of the narrative of forced labour within a narrative of resistance imposed on the 'master–forced labourer' relationship, but in doing so they aimed not so much to prove their loyalty to the official discourse on the war as to emphasise their active and protesting posture in general. This protest (most common in men's narratives) was manifested not in overcoming power relations but in practices we call adventurous; these include tales of impossible escapes, of stratagems for making their work easier, of swindles and thefts that went completely unpunished, and so on. All these cases were described with the excitement of youthful adventure rather than as painful reminiscence.

To conclude our account, it is essential to discuss the general structure of the autobiographical narratives of former *Ostarbeiter*, specifically in the open phase of the interviews, which proceeded without any detailed questions or intervention on our part. All the accounts we recorded are half-open narrative autobiographical interviews, designed according to an established pattern of sequential interchange in which the first phase is open, the second is explanatory, the third contains open questions and the fourth is critical. The first, open phase is commonly supposed to be the most important and representatively saturated. It is primarily on the basis of this phase that subsequent interpretations are made, associative series and links are analysed, and the existence of various patterns and models according to which an informant develops his (her) narrative is demonstrated. Our analysis of the strategies of self-representation is mainly based on this phase, but both in carrying out interviews and in analysing them we faced a number of problems, the main one being the informants' varying ability to create a narrative without suggestive questions from us. Those who had already been interviewed in the context of other research projects constructed the first part of the narrative freely and without assistance, as did those who are commonly called 'professional witnesses' – representatives of public organisations of various types, with extensive experience of speaking about themselves and their experience of forced labour at meetings and social events. These narratives are chronologically and topically logical and well-structured and represent a stable, tried and tested construct.

Here we observed a very interesting detail. The stories told by four representatives of the same public organisation, who had worked for completely different masters and at different enterprises, sounded absolutely identical – both in their contents and actors and in the specific details of what had taken place. From this we concluded that institutional communication has been enormously influential in establishing a common pattern in the narratives of 'professional witnesses'. Other informants, predominantly rural dwellers, had had limited practice in presenting their own experience to the public. Consequently, a certain number of the interviews we recorded consist entirely of answers to our questions, often assuming the form of 'problem narratives', that is, free narratives uninterrupted by us but limited to the topics we had previously specified. But neither this nor the peculiarly structured quality of the forced labour narratives offered by representatives of public organisations reduces the cognitive value of the respective accounts.

To return to the problems we faced in conducting the interviews, the following points may also be stressed.¹⁰ On the one hand, former *Ostarbeiter* often look forward to a conversation in the form of an interview, stressing that it removes 'weight from their souls' that has oppressed them

for many years. Yet at the same time, and this is very notable, they continue to be afraid of this 'weight' and 'truth'. The questions 'May I speak about it?' or 'Who else will listen to my story?', as well as the request that we turn off the tape recorder so they can speak 'without extra ears', are heard on our cassettes all too often. The 'conflict of association' should be underlined here, too: our respondents were much more ready to speak (for example to me) if, during our conversation, they could trust me and 'forget' that I might represent the official institutions that they are still afraid of, seeing me as a person who, by my age, could be their daughter or granddaughter.

The accounts of former Ukrainian *Ostarbeiter* are still influenced by the marginality and isolation of the past years, in other words the 'ban on memory' that resulted from official Soviet ideology. But at the same time they are gradually becoming acceptable to society, finding their place in the structure of post-Soviet historical discourse. And in characterising the specific features of *Ostarbeiter* memoirs, we need to be aware that their specificity emerges directly out of this transitional condition.

NOTES

1. Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill 2005), 12.
2. Orest Subtelny, 'The Soviet Occupation of Western Ukraine, 1939–41: An Overview', in: Yury Boshyk (ed.), *Ukraine during World War II* (Edmonton 1986), 7.
3. Bohdan Krawchenko, 'Soviet Ukraine under Nazi Occupation, 1941–1944', in Boshyk, *Ukraine during World War II*, 15.
4. Украинская ССР в Великой Отечественной войне Советского Союза 1941–1945 гг. / В 3-х т. / Ред. колл. Назаренко И. Д. и др. / Том 3. Советская Украина в завершающий период Отечественной войны (1944–1945 гг.). – Киев, 1975. – С. 153..
5. Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv (BA/MA). – RW 31/16. – p. 18.
6. Центральний Державний архів вищих органів влади (ЦДАВО). – Ф. 3206. – оп. 2. – справа 78. – арк. 1-52.
7. Pavel M. Polyan, *Zhertvy dnuh diktatur: Ostarbaytery i voennoplennyye v Tretem reyhe i ih repartatsiya* (Moscow 1996), 82.
8. N.a., *Nimetsko-fashistsky okupatsiyny vezhyim na Ukraini* (Kiev 1963), 57–58.
9. This information was provided by the Kharkiv City Society of Victims of Nazism; it has not been published.
10. See also Gelinada Grinchenko, 'Ostarbeiter del Tercer Reich: recordar y olvidar como estrategias de supervivencia', in *Historia, Antropología y Fuentes Orales*, vol. 35: "Utopía y Contrautopía" (2006): 123–137.