



HEROES & PROTAGONISTS

Creating and interpreting heroes and heroism in a national context

17-18 September 2014 – Lietuvos Istorijos Institutas, Vilnius

In order to be successful, nationalism had to be adopted by the masses. However, the influence of key figures in the development of national movements is unmistakable, but at the same time multilayered and complex. To assess the role of individuals, both celebrated heroes and mostly invisible militants, NISE organises a series of scientific meetings in which the eclectic companies of politicians, activists, philosophers, writers, poets, philologists, linguists, journalists etc. will be analysed. How did prestige and actual power relate? Whose impact was strongest? How and why are individuals remembered? To be freed from the strains of suspicious glorifications, our starting point for determining heroes / protagonists / historical (key) figures is Leonid Grinin's description: 'Owing to his or her personal features, or to a chance, or to his or her social standing, or to the peculiarity of the epoch, an individual by the very fact of his or her existence, by his or her ideas or actions (or inaction) directly or indirectly, during his or her lifetime or after his or her death may have such an influence upon his own or another society which can be recognized significant as they left a noticeable mark (positive, negative or unambiguous) in history and in the further development of society.' The first step in studying the role(s) of the individual will be a thorough analysis of the notion of heroism in national movements. In a later phase, the conference results will be compared with the impact of figures out of the spotlights.

Studying a nation's heroes comes with a price: doubts on the scholar's integrity. In times when nothing is as volatile as fame and renown, research of undisputed great personalities might seem void of any relevance at best, but not seldom as a dangerous, suspicious undertaking – a fate even worse than the usual reception of 'nationalist studies' among anti-nationalists and many others alike. These criticisms force scholars to deeply reflect whether and how a study of national heroes can be something else than a glorification. How can it live up to scientific standards? As Holocaust-survivor Elie Wiesel put it, heroism lies in concrete acts rather than in people, since blind worship grants too much power to an individual. Notwithstanding these (often justified) concerns, the concept of heroes is an important tool to understand nationalist movements and their history. Maybe it is even a decisive step in a nation's formation and success, in line with Anthony D. Smith's remark that 'every nationalism requires a touchstone of virtue and heroism, to guide and give meaning to the tasks of regeneration.'

Once convinced of the theme's importance, a second obstacle emerges. Who are a nation's heroes? How does an individual become a hero? The answers to these questions cannot be straightforward, since the definition of heroism varies. A recurrent idea is the notion of sacrifice, 'the extraordinary free gift of the self, made with little thought of reward and with the knowledge that survival is chancy' (Goode 1978), often in the context of military

battles (Blomberg e.a. 2009). Among the other possible key elements frequently figure moral or physical courage, leadership, pride, intellectual authority, control over oneself and others, superiority, exemplary worth, public admiration, impact on the course of history. The inclusion in this list of 'a buddy or sidekick' in a recent book on heroism (Allison & Goethals 2011), clearly derived from popular media as comics and movies, reveals how the vision of heroism is culturally defined. Whereas psychologists only very recently have come to accept this (Jayawickreme & Di Stefano 2012), historians have already traced the fleeting content of the concept back to earlier times, from the belligerent warriors of Antiquity over the monarchs of ancient lineage in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and Enlightenment's *philosophes* to the unknown soldiers of the Great War.

The perception of heroes is complex and evolving, and so is the scientific analysis of the topic. For many centuries, fate or a divine plan were deemed responsible for individuals' behaviour. In the Enlightenment the idea that free will determined people's actions firmly took root, but only in the nineteenth century did the individual's role in history become subject of theoretical treatises. With a series of lectures in May 1840, later published in an influential tract, Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle was the founder of the so-called Great Man theory: 'All things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.' This (essentialist) vision was later in the century challenged by social determinists proclaiming the course of history a necessity of which the so-called heroes were a mere symbol at best. Other theorists positioned themselves between these two extremes, until fascism and World War II seriously discredited the notion of Great Men altogether: 'heroism' became a *topos* of literary studies, only to reappear in academic history in the 1970s. Despite recent attempts to cope with the notion, historians experience difficulties in finding a 'zufriedenstellende Antwort' (Disselkamp 2002). A shared historical approach to heroism is therefore non-existent.

A common and seemingly undisputed characteristic of many recent studies of national heroes is the idea that they are to a large extent cultural constructions (as, naturally, some argue that 'nations' or 'collectives' themselves are). Guntis Šmidchens for example systematically analysed, for the three Baltic countries, how heroes were invented from the nineteenth century onwards, only very loosely based on fragmentary historical sources, and subsequently modified according to changing societal needs and expectations. This baseline was already present in Paul Freedman's study of heroic narratives in Renaissance Catalonia: 'The past [...] can be manipulated to yield supposed lessons or to support political arguments.' That this striving was not only propagated by cultural or political elites, was recently proved in Venita Datta's book on heroes in *fin-de-siècle* France: in this period, labelled the very height of hero worship, the boulevard theatre and mass press actively glorified both contemporary and historical figures, in order to help the population overcome the military defeat of 1870. This constructivist vision, however, has its limits. Based upon a comparative study of three nations, Linas Eriksonas assumed a close relationship of heroic traditions (often rooted in early modern history) and national identity: whenever a nation was stateless or subjugated, heroes were invoked to foster the sense of community and, in doing so, to prepare the people for battle.

The worship of national heroes, appealing to people's emotions, is functional indeed. Nationalists resort to historical and contemporary figureheads to promote ideals of unity, beyond internal differences of class or religion. Heroes operate within a given society by setting moral examples, to be followed by the people; often this goal is brought within reach by ascribing human, recognisable traits to otherwise legendary, transcendent figures. Established regimes equally see the value of heroes as a tool to increase their legitimacy. This usage of heroes at various moments is significant. Russian philosopher of history Leonid Grinin discerned four different phases of society states, with changing degrees of both stability and the chance for individuals to exert crucial influence. It was already widely accepted that in times of crisis, like war and revolution, not only historical figures are awakened, but that the likelihood of new heroes coming to the fore increases (Hook 1943). Grinin interestingly updated this with the argument that the probability of strong individuals (or heroes) is higher *after* the collapse of a regime, during the formation of a new system. Clearly, such a phased approach clears the way for a reappraisal of the individual in nationalist studies, by assessing his/her role in existing frameworks of nationalism, like the one developed by Miroslav Hroch. Comparative research must clarify whether the rise of heroes is critical or rather coincidental for nations' successes and failures, how the heroes of nation states and those of small nations differ, in which conditions they appear and to what effect they are made use of. Are they indeed 'fairy-tale figures' put out and absorbed at times of crisis?

To unravel the mechanics of national hero worship, several perspectives can be taken into account. The hero has to be analysed in his relation to the masses: while on the one hand inspiring them, he/she depends on their endorsement – both during and after his/her life; hence the importance of press, publications, meetings and other means of MASS COMMUNICATION. Since people have to choose to be led and influenced, the dynamics can be labelled a complimentary meeting of minds. EDUCATION is another important field: attitudes and sympathies are to a large extent formed during childhood, so school curricula and other youth domains are vital in the heroes' image. GENDER has no less relevance: a massive majority of national heroes are Great *Men* (e.g. so-called father figures as Czech František Palacký), an unbalanced situation that undoubtedly sheds light on the ruling world view. A related dimension is that of NATIONAL IDENTITY: how does the (selection of the) hero embody a nation's self-image, how is it related to hostile images, and what is the strategy behind such demonisation? No less promising is a study of the SOURCES of hero worship: what is the basis for the knowledge of historical figures? Do nationalists use techniques that have proved their value in other spheres, religion for example? And how do strategies for the PROMOTION of historical and contemporary heroes differ? To answer these and other questions, not only for a single period but preferably over a longer time to discern evolutions, a COMPARATIVE APPROACH is the obvious choice: the confrontation of leading personalities, nations, epochs, degrees of success ... is well suited to precisely ascertain the mechanics of national hero worship.

Conference outline

Why and how do people become national heroes, and how is this related to the stage of national development? In order to answer this central question and other related ones (Who are these men and/or women? Which aspects contribute to their heroic status? Who appropriates the heroes? ...), the conference will have four thematic sessions. During a fifth and final session, a first synthesis will be given; at the same time, bridges will be built to the follow-up study of less glorified but yet crucial operatives in national movements, as such contributing to the goal of comparing heroes and protagonists.

1. Historical figures

In many, if not all national movements historical (or even mythical) figures were 'awakened' in order to inspire their offspring in the national struggle.

2. Contemporary figures

People from within national movements could acquire unique, almost superhuman powers, during their lifetime or shortly upon their death. Their sympathisers or they themselves used several strategies or platforms.

3. Heroism in socio-cultural circles

In organised life, children and adults were given examples of national exemplary worth. Celebrations, memorials, meetings, ritual performances... were instrumental in the afterlife of the figureheads of national movements.

4. Heroism in popular media

Mass communication was an important tool for emerging national movements. Both by means of orchestrated campaigns and in more subtle discourses could the press make or break people.

For the conference and book, the organisers invite submissions that cover any of the themes and perspectives mentioned above. Abstracts (deadline: **31 December 2013**) should count c. 250 words. We seek innovative and multi-disciplinary approaches, and all 'hero' classifications will be welcomed and considered. Moreover, we offer all participants the opportunity to enter their data in the NISE database in order to enhance comparative history.

Contact and information

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An organisation of NISE,
with the assistance of the Welsh Nationalism Foundation
and hosted by the Lietuvos Istorijos Institutas



Suggested literature

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- S.B. Blomberg, G.D. Hess & Y. Raviv, 'Where have all the heroes gone? A rational-choice perspective on heroism', in: *Public Choice*, 141 (2009) 509-522.
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- Th. Carlyle, *On heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history* (London: Chapman and Hall, s.d.).
- V. Datta, *Heroes and legends of fin-de-siècle France. Gender, politics, and national identity* (Cambridge: University Press, 2011).
- M. Disselkamp, *Barockheroismus: Konzeptionen 'politischer' Grösse in Literatur und Traktatistik des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002).
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<http://www.myhero.com/go/hero.asp?hero=Wiesel_Concept_bk06> [accessed 26/11/2012]