

Tom Verschaffel

INTRODUCTION

ON THE USE AND DISADVANTAGE OF HEROES FOR THE NATION

You can be assured of my heartfelt respect for heroes, said the princess in a slightly mocking tone.

(Marcel Proust, *Swann's way*)

Nations needed heroes to settle and establish themselves. They had to tell stories to justify their existence and to shape their identity. These stories were in need of protagonists. 'If territorialisation and periodisation were the most important structuring elements of national histories, canons of national heroes and national enemies both embodying and reflecting national characteristics, were their necessary accompaniment', Stefan Berger writes.¹ Heroes (and their opponents) are necessary to generate identification and involvement. As nations have an emotional foundation, they exist by means of commitment, and it is through this commitment that historical characters become *heroes*. This implies that heroes have a responsibility, a mission and a purpose. They are bound to express and to embody the self-consciousness of the nation, as well as hopes for the future, and among the members of the nation they stimulate self-



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awareness, perseverance, pride and patriotism. They personify the continuity with the past and with the ancestors, recall golden eras and glorious moments of the national story and prefigure an equally glorious future. The hero's role thus is multiple and so is his status. He belongs to the nation and at the same time he is exalted above it. His appeal and usefulness lie in the fact that he is both ordinary and extraordinary; he is at once rule and exception.

It is not inappropriate to speak of 'he' and 'his'. Heroes were, certainly in the nineteenth century but also later, predominantly male. 'The history of state formation and the history of war (both histories are deeply interconnected) were mainly themes celebrating the virtues of warriors and statesmen. The close relation between war, the military and nation-state formation excluded women,' as Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz state.² That does not mean, however, that women did not figure in national histories or could not achieve hero status. Sometimes they did, taking specific roles as carriers of resistance or peace and as a counterpoint to the masculine violence. In 'the nation as a family [...] male and female virtues were combined to produce perfect national harmony and unity', according to Berger and Lorenz.³ Yet there have been female fighters too, whose glorification rested precisely on the extraordinary fact that they had taken on male qualities and 'transcended' their female roles.⁴

For the creation and promotion of national heroes (and heroines), many resources were deployed, according to the period in which these processes happened. Initially this was the time of Romanticism, which led to a hero cult in statues and in written, painted, engraved and sculpted pantheons, in history painting, popular histories, historical novels and, as Adelheid Ceulemans documents in her contribution to this volume, musical theatre. Hero cult focuses on the individual as personification of the nation. This engenders a biographical treatment of historical figures and a cult of the locations of their life, birthplace, house, grave. There are media, genres and forms for exalting the individual and one – the most characteristic form of nineteenth-century hero worship – to put him literally on a pedestal: the statue.

Forms change over time, not only because the artistic context changes, but also because of the evolving character of nations themselves and the nature of their appeal to the past and to heroes. The propaganda of national culture and patriotism makes it necessary to put the heroes on the broadest possible stage and to sing their praise again and again, for every new generation: statues and biographical locations became the centre and the scene of public rituals and festive demonstrations. Heroes played a role in national celebrations and came to life in historical parades for mass audiences. As Marijan Dović indicates in his contribution to this volume, in the nineteenth century small-scale initiatives of hero worship gradually made place for 'mass commemorative cults attracting incredible numbers of people who may have little or no intimate knowledge of the venerated person's life, opus or ideas'. The collectivisation of the relationship to the hero is followed by the progressive massification of national movements in the twentieth century.

Heroes are diverse and their fate and appearance multiple and changeable. When Berger lists the 'ingredients of the national history stew', he not only emphasises the indispensability of heroes (and enemies), but he also asserts that the national hero canons 'often change substantially over time and between alternative and rival historical master narratives'.⁵ Heroes are willing, flexible and malleable: they do what they should do. Simultaneously or subsequently, they can be instrumentalised by different groups, nations and subnations, serve different objectives and embody various identities. For the purpose of layered identities, they are simultaneously national, regional and local. Statues of heroes generally honour their nation as well as their (local) birthplace, they precisely link towns and regions to the nation. Heroes are versatile, because like the nations themselves they are constructions. They do not exist – or rather, they are not heroes – beyond the story told about them and the use made thereof. By definition, they are adapted to that use.

Yet the study of heroes and hero worship is food for discussion and nuances, along the lines of the opposition between constructivism and primordialism: the first reduces heroes almost entirely to their functionality, the second emphasises their own agency and the limitations of their malleability. This is particularly applicable to the heroes of the

recent past. Historical figures of the twentieth century are familiar with the mechanisms of glorification and hero worship. Moreover, they are not 'innocent' historical characters, who are presented as a prefiguration and precursors of a national cause invented post factum, but politicians and activists who are aware of their nationalism and deliberately and purposefully want to play an active role in the national story. Therefore they strategically apply their knowledge, their appearance and self-fashioning.

In his study of political trials of Catalan political leaders, presented in this issue, Joan Esculies shows that these trials mainly aimed at having an impact on the public and public opinion, and were a vehicle for glorification of the nationalists. The defendants themselves seized the momentum to give speeches that were not meant to argue their innocence, but rather to promote the national cause and thus prepare their own hero status. Yet these contemporary heroes cannot fully control their fate as a hero. During his lifetime the potential hero prepares his case, but only after his death he is consecrated. In that sense death is welcome and useful. In his contribution Ludger Mees presents the case of the Basque nationalist leader Jose Antonio Aguirre: he went through a process of 'charisma-degrading' at the end of his life, but this was stopped by his death. By then criticism ceased and Aguirre could assume his position in the Basque pantheon.

Just like modern heroes historical characters have their possibilities as well as their restrictions. Their characteristics and life stories have aspects and defects that make them more or less suitable as heroes. The extent to which heroes can be accustomed to changing conditions (to some degree) depends on the historical substance of their life story. Some heroes can be 'converted' to a new national cause, while in other cases national shifts may lead to disqualification. Jan Breydel and Pieter de Coninck, the (alleged) heroes of the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302, could be transformed rather smoothly from Belgian to Flemish heroes, unlike crusader Godfrey of Bouillon who was not recyclable by the Flemish nationalists. Coro Rubio and Santiago de Pablo show that Basque participation in Spanish wars made their protagonists suitable as Basque heroes as long as a Basque narrative was seen as compatible with the

Spanish national story, but at the time the radicalisation counterposed Basque self-awareness and independence efforts to Spanish patriotism, these protagonists could no longer function as Basque heroes.

The obstacles and limitations of adaptability also explain the different types of heroes and ensure the changing status over time. Initially national heroes are mostly political and military leaders, royals and freedom fighters, actors of the success and the glory of the nation and its march towards independence, and martyrs who have sacrificed their life for the national cause. Useful heroes of this type are not always available, though. Rubio and De Pablo show in their article that the Basque have no 'foundation hero' or 'personalised foundation myth', and the same holds true for Flanders. National movements were looking for heroes in a cause that in many cases did not yet play and was even literally unthinkable in the (remote) past, and therefore was difficult to attribute convincingly to historical characters.

In addition to political and military heroes, who can be represented as if they have directly contributed to the independence and the (political) life of the nation, cultural heroes in particular have taken a large share in the national pantheons. As an alternative to the absence or disablement of political heroes, they are by their very nature more flexible and more easily employable. The mere fact that a writer used a specific language often was sufficient to present him as a forerunner of the current struggle for the use of that language and the recognition of a national culture. It was not so hard to grant a political significance to this choice. That a painter or sculptor was widely known and had gained international recognition in his time and thereafter, could be considered as an adequate contribution to the glory, self-awareness and identity of the nation, thus justifying a hero status.

That the status of heroes is a construction explains their various occurrences, their employability and flexibility, and their changeable and impermanent character. (Recent) history provides many examples of how heroes have lost their status. Not only modifications in the national consciousness, but also shifting ideologies can result in historical figures, after a period of worship, becoming problematic. National pride then

makes room for embarrassment, shame and rejection. Statues are meant to last forever, but they can be besmirched, attacked, moved and taken down. Or they are provided with new plaques, historicising the monument and explaining that the adoration of which it testifies, is not shared or supported anymore. This is particularly true for crusaders and colonial 'heroes'.⁶ In many places statues were indeed torn down after political regime changes, or they were moved and musealised, thus revealing that the past the venerated where the protagonists of, is closed and gone. More generally, the appeal to strong leaders and national activists has been discredited by twentieth-century excesses. The implicit glorification of violence of which the nineteenth-century nationalist hero cult often testifies, now makes us uncomfortable. This has not led to the evanescence of hero worship altogether, but it has incited new forms of veneration and new types of heroes who have replaced the kings, freedom fighters and writers and painters.

Where the nineteenth century already witnessed a collectivisation and thus a certain democratisation of hero worship, in the second half of the twentieth century the hero himself was democratised. Hero status was no longer reserved for exceptional individuals, but was awarded to collective and anonymous heroes, to 'ordinary' people. They respond to a new emergency. In her contribution Juli Székely makes clear that these 'silent heroes unambiguously overtook the official role of traditional heroes as historical, social and cultural models for German society'. The forms and media adapted to this cult not of exceptional but of ordinary people. They focused not on the individual, but on the multitude. There were hardly any statues erected anymore, and when it was the case, they were no longer placed in the middle of a square, high on a monumental pedestal, but on ground level, on a bridge, near a wall or at the edge of the square. These modest heroes are not portrayed as unattainable demigods, to whom one must literally look up, but as ordinary people, blending into the crowd. Newer monuments, however, mostly do not represent individuals, portrayed in a more or less realistic manner, but have a more abstract character and are devoted to the memory of traumatic events, honouring victims rather than perpetrators. One may wonder whether in this situation the term 'hero' is still suitable. Is a 'hero' not rather he or she

who rescues a child that has fallen in a pond, gets someone out of a burning house, or overpowers a terrorist on a moving train? Someone who performs admirable actions, that are rewarded with recognition and a medal, but not with a tribute cast in stone and meant for eternity. The extraordinary character of these heroic deeds lies in the fact that they are performed by ordinary people, by someone like you and me. They carry the message that everyone is a hero or may be one, that anyone can be brave and in exceptional circumstances can pose an exceptional act. *We can be heroes, just for one day.*

Endnotes

¹ S. Berger in collaboration with Ch. Conrad, *The past as history. National identity and historical consciousness in Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2015) 362.

² S. Berger & Ch. Lorenz, 'Conclusion: picking up the threads', in: S. Berger & Ch. Lorenz (eds.), *The contested nation: ethnicity, class, religion and gender in national histories* (Basingstoke, 2008) 531-552 (544).

³ Berger & Lorenz, 'Conclusion: picking up the threads', 545.

⁴ See a.o. T. Verschaffel, 'Een mannelijk hart in een vrouwelijk lichaam. Vorstinnen, heldinnen en andere sterke vrouwen in de historische beeldvorming', in: K. Wils (ed.), *Het lichaam m/v* (Leuven, 2001) 184-208.

⁵ Berger & Conrad, *The past as history*, 362.

⁶ See a.o. I. Goddeeris, 'Square de Léopoldville of Place Lumumba? De Belgische (post)koloniale herinnering in de publieke ruimte', in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 129 (2016) 349-371.