

Project Group B5

National Crisis and Political Heroism in the Long Nineteenth Century: Bonapartism in European Comparison

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The starting point of this project was the question of how, when, and why the image of a new kind of political hero based on Bonaparte, Napoleon I, and Napoleon III developed between c. 1800 and the 1870s, which expressed itself in different forms throughout Europe, along with the question of how this Napoleonic heroism was instrumentalized by the politics of history throughout these developments in various European societies. The heroizations of Napoleon as a charismatic and exceptional savior and ruler who was the product of the revolution outlasted the end of his reign in 1815 and his death in 1821 and developed into a highly contested model for post-revolutionary political heroism in Europe in the course of the nineteenth century. The project group's initial hypothesis was that contemporary discourses of heroes – the shortcomings and dangers of heroic characteristics – also reflected fundamental debates about the nature of politics as well as legitimation and de-legitimation after the experiences of revolution, war, and national crises.

In contrast to traditional research of Bonapartism, which has primarily explored this subject from two perspectives – as a conceptual reality in the form of a concrete political program,¹ and as a myth connected to the person² – this project group understood and explored it as not only a strategy for usurping power, but as a platform for the communication of political heroism in different post-revolutionary contexts in Europe. The project group thus first researched the self-heroization of Bonaparte/Napoleon as a prerequisite for the Bonapartist heroic model, after which it focused on European appropriations and perceptions of, and engagement with, this model from a comparative perspective. In terms of methodology, the project group combined approaches from the political history of discourses according to the Cambridge School,³ to which it added a systematically comparative component.

Initially, the project group intended to research the period between c. 1800 and the 1870s. However, this was then narrowed to the time between 1821 and 1869. The beginning and the end of this timeframe are marked by the death of Napoleon and the 100-year anniversary of his birthday, one year before the collapse of the Second French Empire. The project group thus concentrated on posthumous Napoleonism, which narrowed and substantiated its focus. It was also legitimized by the fact that the death of Bonaparte marked a watershed for Napoleonism. It was at this time, if not before, that the different forms of Napoleon's heroization lost their function as classic representations of power. Instead, they became instruments in the creation of historico-political meaning. Based on the research and analysis of historical sources, several instances when European Napoleonic discourses became more concentrated could be identified within this timeframe, such as the transfer of Napoleon's body to Paris in 1840, and the funeral of the Duke of Wellington in London in 1852. This allowed

¹ Bluche, F. 1980: *Le Bonapartisme: aux origines de la droite autoritaire (1800–1850)*, Paris; Ménager, B. 1988: *Les Napoléon du peuple*, Paris.

² Tulard, J. 1977: *Napoléon ou le mythe du sauveur*, Paris; Tulard, J. 1971: *Le mythe de Napoléon*, Paris.

³ Pocock, J. G. A. 1987: *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the 17th Century*, Cambridge.

certain historical phases to become part of the historical analysis. These instances also provided a structure for the project group and culminated in a monograph.

The originally intended comparison between France, Great Britain, and Germany proved to be asymmetrical, with France taking up more room due to the unique inherent logic of this theme. This was not simply a practical consideration, but a result of the quantity and quality of historical sources. In France, there was much more discussion about Napoleon and many more published works about him than in the other two countries. This indicates that, apart from the fact that Napoleonism was a distinctly French phenomenon, Napoleon was a figure who had greater political and social significance in France. In the group's selection of primary sources, public, mass media-based European book markets became a fundamental criterion, meaning that the project group mainly focused on public debates and discourses in published materials. An engagement with potential counter heroes – Nelson, Wellington, Louise of Prussia, Blücher – was only integrated in so far as these were addressed in the actual Napoleonic discourses.

The group project also decided against the term "Bonapartism," which was originally used in the application, and worked with the term "Napoleonism" instead. This was because Bonapartism was used in the terminology of contemporary sources in the early 1830s, if not before, as a clearly defined term to describe the affiliation with an – albeit only vaguely defined – political orientation that consisted of following and admiring the person of Napoleon Bonaparte. Hence, the term was equally charged in research. "Napoleonism," on the other hand, proved a less clearly defined term in primary and secondary sources and was thus suited for the project group as a definition of the subject of research: the discourse of Napoleon as a hero in the nineteenth century.

On a theoretical level, the project group also intended to replace the existing narrow definition of Bonapartism as a political program for gaining power as used in political science and the classic history of ideas with a comparative perspective based on cultural studies. This was achieved by defining the subject or research with the term Napoleonism. The project group expanded its initial approach, in which Bonapartism was understood as a context of communication, by regarding Napoleonism as a mode of discourse. For this purpose, a very broad concept of discourse was used in order to work with a large body of sources that included many media and genres. This definition thus allowed the researched speech acts to be analyzed without any affirmative or critical judgement, which made it possible to comprehensively investigate processes of heroization and de-heroization – in other words, processes negotiating the figure of Napoleon according to all heroic categories. Additionally, by applying this mode of discourse, approaches based on Pocock's history of discourses could be fruitfully combined with approaches based on historical semantics.

While such a break with the classic dualistic perspective on Bonapartism was already evident in recent studies on Napoleon,⁴ these usually lacked either a consistent approach based on cultural studies, or a comparative perspective. In addition to a departure from classic research of Bonapartism, compared to more recent Napoleonic research, the project group's research also represents the next logical step within a transnational "*relecture*" (rereading) of Napoleonism.

The project group's concrete goals were to conduct a systematic analysis of the origins, semantics, transformations, and trends of Napoleon's heroization and the forms of Bonapartist

⁴ Beßlich, B. 2007: Der deutsche Napoleon-Mythos. Literatur und Erinnerung 1800 bis 1945, Darmstadt; Fureix, E. 2009: Napoléon, „la plus grande mort du siècle“, in: id.(ed.), La France des larmes. Deuils politiques à l'âge romantique (1814–1840), Paris, p. 403–434; Jourdan, A. 1998: Napoléon. Héros, imperator, mécène, Paris; Petiteau, N. 1999: Napoléon, de la mythologie à l'histoire, Paris; Semmel, S. 2004: Napoleon and the British, New Haven.

heroism from a European perspective and to use this as a reference frame for the political justification of power and communication of the political between 1800 and 1870. It also set out to systematically research, and gain fundamental insights into, “heroisms” (heroically shaped habitus patterns by which communities acculturate heroic models) relating to Bonaparte/Napoleon by focusing on the scope as well as the integrative and symbolic power of political heroisms in the nineteenth century, especially the heroisms of Napoleon and his contemporary counter heroes in Great Britain and Germany. After making certain adjustments and narrowing the focus, both goals were achieved by the project group and will be described in detail in the historical monograph that is being written by the project group’s assistant. The project group was able to demonstrate to what extent heroes in post-revolutionary societies in the nineteenth century were used as instruments in national political struggles over the interpretation of history and the creation of meaning. This is especially true for the historical figure of Napoleon. In the period of research in France, he became a contested figure of different historico-political concepts of tradition located between the changing regimes and political opposition. The same phenomenon also happened in other national contexts for counter heroes, such as Wellington, who was at the center of debates about national identity in Great Britain.⁵ Such political and historical processes of negotiation took place in national as well as transnational contexts – meaning the project group was also able to gain insights into the heroization processes at work in the interplay between national and transnational aspects. That a prominent group of Napoleonists was seen as transnational meant that their heroizing (or de-heroizing) speech acts often evolved within a specific national context, after which they were transferred to a transnational context, from which they moved into other national contexts, where their interpretations changed radically or were newly constituted. The question of the role of the media in forming and permanently evolving political and social mass markets also played a key role.

The project group’s participation in the “Deheroisierung” (De-heroization) joint work group no. 3 resulted in a joint publication (Marquart et al. 2015). A special collaboration was also initiated with the project groups A5 and B8 in the form of two jointly organized workshops: “Die Biografie des Helden: Perspektiven auf Narration, Konstruktion und Rezeption” (The Biography of the Hero: Perspectives on Narration, Construction, and Reception) and “Der Glanz des Helden” (The Glamour of the Hero). The project group’s assistant also held a lecture at the SFB conference “Sakralität und Heldentum. Zum Relationsgeflecht von Heroischem und Religiösem” (Sacredness and the Heroic. On the Inter-Relatedness of the Heroic and the Religious) (2014) (Marquart 2016).

The project group’s assistant teamed up with PD Dr. Isabelle Deflers (University of Freiburg) and Prof. Dr. Erich Pelzer (University of Mannheim) to organize the conference “Napoleon Bonaparte als Held, Dämon und Visionär: Deutungsprojektionen im 19. Jahrhundert” (Napoleon Bonaparte as Hero, Demon, and Visionary: Projections of Interpretations in the 19th century) in 2016. This event was hosted by the Frankreich-Zentrum (French Research Center) of the University of Freiburg and the SFB on October 28, 2016.

Publications by the Project Group

Leonhard, J. 2014: Der Hü-und-hott-Kanzler. Bonapartist oder Charismatiker? Eine Analyse der Bismarckschen Herrschaftstechnik, in: ZEIT Geschichte Magazin 4/14: Bismarck: Reaktionär, Revolutionär, Opportunist der Macht, pp. 42–46.

⁵ Pears, I. 1992: The Gentleman and the Hero. Wellington and Napoleon in the Nineteenth Century, in: R. S. Porter (ed.), *Myths of the English*, Cambridge, pp. 216–236.

- Leonhard, J. 2014: Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs, 5th ed. München, pp. 160–205, pp. 415–424, pp. 434–470, pp. 563–579, pp. 595–608, pp. 615–634, pp. 979–997.
- Marquart, B. 2017: Napoleons Golgota – Sakralisierende Heldenverehrung zwischen Restauration und Julimonarchie, in: F. Heinzer / J. Leonhard / R. von den Hoff (eds.), Sakralität und Heldentum. Zum Relationsgeflecht von Heroischem und Religiösem (Helden – Heroisierungen – Heroismen 6), Würzburg, pp. 215–228.
- Marquart, B. [et al.] 2015: Phänomene der Deheroisierung in Vormoderne und Moderne, in: helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen 3.1: Faszinosum Antiheld, pp. 135–149, DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros/2015/01/13.
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