Special Section: Cultures of Victory

JCH

Journal of Contemporary History
2019, Vol. 54(4) 711–715

DOI: 10.1177/0022009419838042
journals.sagepub.com/home/jch
SAGE

Introduction: The Burdens of Triumph – Victorious Societies in Twentieth Century European History

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The contributions to this special section of the Journal of Contemporary History are the results of a workshop held at Maynooth University, Ireland, in November 2017, and funded by the Journal of Contemporary History. The workshop brought together historians that worked on a range of case studies spanning Europe's twentieth century.[1] We discussed, in comparative terms, how victory affected postwar societies since the First World War. We approached war victory as a potential problem: the beginning of a new set of difficulties rather than the resolution of the old. It seemed to us that historians rarely approached war victory in this way, tending to focus instead on the troubles faced by states and societies in the aftermath of defeat.[2] We wanted to search for the divided legacies of war that lay partially or fully hidden beneath state-level cultures of victory. We wanted to explore the way hegemonic national or state-sanctioned cultures of victory allowed wartime tensions to linger on unresolved and unaddressed.

We set at the outset a series of questions for contributors to consider, some of which we answered in part or in whole, some of which led to new lines of enquiry. The initial questions were: what role does the presence of a culture of victory play

1 And the idea for this workshop was born at a conference on First World War veterans and their internationalist ties in the interwar period, held at Trinity College Dublin in 2009, whose results were subsequently published in the collection *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*. For a preliminary outline of the 'cultures of victory' concept, see J. Horne, 'Beyond Cultures of Victory and Defeat: Interwar Veterans' Internationalism', in J. Eichenberg and J.P. Newman, *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism* (New York, NY 2013).

2 And indeed, the concept of a 'culture of victory' is a conscious allusion to Wolfgang Schivelbusch's seminal collection of essays *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, which showed how military and/or national defeat has proven a powerful transformative force in modern history, driving societies and peoples towards new political or social projects, or towards the resurrection, *mutatis mutandis*, of the old.

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in the inhibiting of state or societal integration and postwar reconciliation? In what ways do such cultures marginalize groups based on war experience, nationality, gender, and other categories? Do cultures of victory matter more or less in liberal or illiberal societies, right- or left-wing authoritarian states, fascist dictatorships? Is there a relationship between the scale of violence and societal divisions caused by war and the vehemence with which the culture of victory is asserted in any given case study? How far do each of these case studies coincide or conflict with the overarching ideas and narratives about war victory in Europe's twentieth century? And what are the implications of this on European integration, collective identity, and common political purpose? Our findings are presented in this special section, and they are summarized, partially and briefly, in this short introduction.

Firstly, we found that just as the victors of war are able to dictate terms to the vanquished, cultures of victory tend to impose themselves unto all sections of post-war society, in spite of – or *because of* – fractures and fault lines carried over from conflict. The result is often the marginalization or alienation of those sections of society that do not share the majority culture of victory, a process that can lead to the undermining of postwar reconciliation and the strengthening of national culture in peacetime. The phenomenon of victory marginalizing the defeated is clearly observable in conventional post-civil war states, such as the Franco's Spain, Greece after 1949, independent Ireland from 1921 onwards. In such post-conflict societies, significant parts of the population found themselves on what became in peacetime the wrong side of the wartime divide, national cultures of victory are imposed upon all of postwar society, leaving little or no public space for counter-narratives or challenges to the official story of the war. It is a rare society that is willing to compromise or dilute the culture of victory, at least in the immediate aftermath of conflict. But to stick so rigidly to a narrative of war that is shared by only parts of the population is to jeopardize the processes of cultural demobilization that are needed for a state and society to move fully from war to peace. Often, only a major change of political system or leadership can create the impetus for such reconciliation.

Following on from this, we found that such acute divisions are not restricted to societies and states that are recovering from civil war: cultures of victory have concealed and therefore exacerbated conflicted legacies in states that have emerged unequivocally on the winning side of Europe's 'classic' interstate wars. Examples of this phenomenon abound in twentieth century Europe. There are, for example, the victorious successor states of Austria-Hungary, whose post-1918: Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. These countries embraced their status as victor states of the First World War. In reality, however, large numbers of their population had fought loyally and to the end for the Central Powers. In Czechoslovakia, only a minority of the new state's war veterans had fought with the Entente in the First World War; Yugoslavia's territories had been on the fault-line of the European conflict; and in Poland, too, soldiers had fought in various armies in the First World War, and had, to a certain extent, been divided again in the Polish-Soviet War that immediately followed. In the interwar period, the inability of these states to confront – in some cases even to acknowledge – the

divided legacies of the war in their own countries seriously undermined the process of state-building and state consolidation. Perhaps, then, the culture of victory conceals the far larger extent of civil war style divisions within European states and societies in the twentieth century, and the consequences of victory are thus more ambivalent than often assumed.

The successor states of East-Central Europe after the First World War seem to present a special kind of problem in that they reveal the gap between a single, usually state-sanctioned culture of victory, and the mixed wartime experiences of societies themselves, but our discussions found that divisions are also present in the western victors of the First World War, and that divisions exist *within* cultures of victory as well as in states where victory and defeat co-mingle. On the basis of this, we suggest – tentatively – that cultures of victory appear to be less effective in mobilizing and unifying national societies at a mass level. Sometimes there are practical reasons for this: loss of territories amongst the defeated states of the First World War automatically homogenized societies, whose sense of purpose was then compounded by the severe socio-economic burdens imposed by defeat, punitive reparations, loss of lucrative territories, and so on. In contrast, victor states were often engorged with new territories populated by national minorities or by groups whose experiences of victory and defeat in war were diametrically opposed to their new state. But even in states where this is not the case victory is an ambiguous and contested totem.[3]

Similar insights about the divisive and concealing properties of cultures of victory seem to hold true of the Second World War, also. After that conflict, throughout Europe painful divisions between collaborators, bystanders, and resistors were passed over in what Tony Judt has termed a phenomenon of 'collective amnesia'.[4] Abstracted resistance 'myths' papered over such divisions for at least a generation, presenting a single redemptive story of victimhood and heroism. The most striking example of this is France, where the cult of 'Sword and Shield' resistance to the Axis occupiers belied the way in which the nexus of collaboration and resistance in the Second World War had cleaved French society. But the same could be said for almost all countries that experienced the shocks of defeat and Axis occupation in the Second World War. Whereas in central and eastern Europe, the experience of communist rule from 1945 and its collapse in 1989 further complicated memories of resistance and collaboration, with the former often publicly disavowed for their communism (in ex-Yugoslavia, Albania) while the latter are rehabilitated as opponents of communism (for example, in Romania, Hungary).

Narratives of war victory, then, have obscured the fact that the experience of the kind of fractures usually understood to exist only in societies recovering from civil

3 It was suggested at the Maynooth workshop that perhaps cultures of victory are more likely to reside and be cultivated at state level rather than embedded in postwar societies themselves, a point also made by Maria Bucur-Deckard in her study of war and commemoration in twentieth century Romania, see M. Bucur-Deckard *Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth-Century Romania* (Bloomington, IN 2010).

4 T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London 2005).

wars are actually far more widespread than many people imagine. Foundational myths of war victory serve to obscure acts of mass violence and ethnic cleansing: the case of Atatürk's Turkey in the 1920s is perhaps the most striking example of perpetrator guilt denied because it would undermine a culture of victory. But open discussion of mass violence has also proved problematic or impossible in the case of the Caucasian nations of the Soviet Union, of war crimes committed by the Red Army, or the fate of the Germans of Bohemia and Prussia in the wake of the Second World War.

Finally, are these problems also located above the level of states? The phenomenon of the culture of victory exists also at the European level, technocratic European institutions such as the European Union and its affiliates are also infused with a cultural sense of what has been won and lost in Europe's twentieth century. Contemporary Europe and its institutions identify closely with the values of civil society, universal human rights, free speech, press, and markets – values which were fought and won with the victory of the Second World War. At a deeper level, the primacy of nation-states and national self-determination over empire, of civic over ethnic understandings of nationalism, as well as most of the borders of contemporary Europe, were settled at the conclusion of the First World War. The Entente victory of the First World War and the Allied victory of the Second World War form the basis of a pan-European culture of victory. The centennials of the First World War have reminded us of the ways in which war victory is celebrated and commemorated in national cultures across Europe, sacralized in rituals of commemoration and celebrated in Europe's public spaces and its media. And yet the controversies over commemorations of the centennial of 1914 have revealed that this culture of victory is still contested throughout the continent. As Dan Stone has argued, the consensus about the victory in the Second World War is far smaller than was supposed during the Cold War.[5] And the supposed victory of liberal democracy in 1989 now looks more ambiguous than ever. Europe, too, has its contested cultures of victory.

This special section is intended as the beginning of a conversation about notional cultures of victory rather than the last word. Contributors, taking as inspiration Schivelbusch's own approach, have thought flexibly and broadly about the possible attributes of cultures of victory in the twentieth century. Their conclusions are revealing, often surprising, and seem to confirm that 'winning is only the beginning'.

Acknowledgements

The editing of this special section was carried out while I was a visiting fellow at the Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. I am grateful to Nanci Adler, Peter Romjin, and Ugur Umit Ungor for their hospitality and support there, and for giving me an opportunity to present some of the ideas for the special section at the Institute and in a public

5 D. Stone, *Goodbye to all That: The Story of Europe since 1945* (Oxford 2014).

forum at Spui 25, Amsterdam. Contributors to the special section also met for a one-day workshop at Maynooth University to discuss the direction of the project, made possible by generous funding from the Journal of Contemporary History and the Maynooth Centre for European and Eurasian Studies. Special thanks to additional workshop contributions from Giulia Albanese, Balazs Apor, Judith Devlin, Julia Eichenberg, Maria Falina, John Horne, Alan Kramer, Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses, Matteo Millan, William Mulligan, John O'Brennan, Mercedes Peñalba-Sotorrío, Peter Romjin, and Lili Zach.

Biographical Note

John Paul Newman is Senior Lecturer in Twentieth-century European History. He is the author of *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903–1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and the co-editor (with Judith Devlin and Maria Falina) of *World War One in Central and Eastern Europe: Politics, Conflict, and Military Experience* (I.B. Tauris, 2018), *Sacrifice and Rebirth: The Legacy of the Last Habsburg War* (Berghahn, 2016) (with Mark Cornwall), and *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) (with Julia Eichenberg). He is currently working on three projects: a biography of Habsburg general Josip Jelačić, a study of suicide in modern Bohemia, and a book-length study of irregular violence in the Balkans, titled *Freedom or Death: A History of Guerrilla Warfare in the Balkans*.