

Book Review

Ludger Mees ed., *Héroes y Villanos de la Patria*. Tecnos, Madrid, 2020. 416 pp. ISBN 9788430979332

Some topics are timeless. As Europeans we used to see ourselves as living in a post-heroic age. But here they are back again. In a couple of weeks, we have been thrown into a political landscape inhabited by heroes and villains. And once again we are struggling to uncover the real face of the hero, to decode the intention of his message, the strategies deployed to convince the masses of his role as a savior of the Nation. The collection of essays coordinated by Ludger Mees offers an exciting insight in how the hero is socially constructed in a dynamic and dialogical way, never spared from the possibility of being degraded to the status of its counterpart, the villain.

At first glance, the collection of heroes assembled in this volume may seem eclectic, and in a sense, it is, but precisely the broad spectrum of historical cases throughout different geographic setting makes the strength of this book. Each individual case, presented as an isolated chapter written by a different expert, sheds light on specific mechanisms of hero-building in diverse historical and sociopolitical contexts. But, contrary to what the title may suggest, it is not so much the chosen protagonist of each isolated chapter – hero or villain – which makes the richness of this volume, but rather the complex web of transnational connections and disconnections that appears progressively throughout



Christiane Stallaert, 'Book Review: Ludger Mees ed., *Héroes y Villanos de la Patria*.',
in: *Studies on National Movements* 9 (2022)

the different chapters, as well as the growing consciousness of the fragility and contingency of the hero as a symbol of the nation.

In an introductory part, Ludger Mees sets the stage by reaching some theoretical and practical tools to understand what is meant by 'heroism' as the common thread throughout the range of cases analyzed in the book. Surprisingly, while the category of the patriotic hero is carefully elaborated, less or no attention is given to the definition of the 'villain', which appears indirectly evoked as a negative image of its glorious counterpart. The essays are the result of a research project conducted at the University of the Basque Country under Mees' supervision, which explains the dominant focus on case studies related to the Basque nationalist context. Some of the Basque patriotic heroes, such as Sabino Arana or José Antonio Aguirre, are relatively well known by the public. However, the whole of essays contributes to shed a new light not so much on the hero *qua* hero but rather as a historical figure inserted in a dynamic context of national and transnational, diachronic and synchronic ties and interactions. From chapter to chapter, pieces of this complex web are being disentangled thanks to the distinctive focus put on each single case.

The first essay is of tremendous relevance in today's Europe, as it analyses the multidirectional construction (and deconstruction) of the memory of the battle of Stalingrad, from 1945 to the present. By confronting the distinctive memories created by Germans and Soviets/Russians about this emblematic battle and its political (re)signification throughout time, Núñez Seixas shows very clearly the dependency of the hero/villain status on historical and political contingencies as well as the impact of visual culture (e.g. film making) on these dynamics. The pendular movement between both statuses, the elasticity or even ambiguity of the protagonists is the *leitmotiv* of the next chapters dedicated to the Spanish double spy Juan Pujol García (alias Alaric/Garbo), or to the mutual perception by Irish and Basque patriots

of their respective heroes. The category of the hero exceeds the individual and the local. Several chapters focus on collective heroism such as the soldiers victims of the battle of Stalingrad or the villain/hero status of Basque shepherders in the United States as a result of chain migration from the end of the 19th Century. Even if some cases are more locally settled in time and place (such as the chapter on Basque medieval heroes between legend and history), the international, global context is never far away, as appears from the chapter on Nelson Mandela, who, as a symbol of peace and struggle for human rights, embodies the capacity of the patriotic hero to transcend the local and grow into a universal hero. An interesting *leitmotiv* throughout the book is the dialogic construction of heroism (and its inevitable counter-image, the villain), in a national as well as international context: Basques and Irish nationalists, Navarrese and Basques, Basques and Catalans, and so on. Obviously, no patriotism can exist or grow without interaction with other patriotisms, or, as the definition goes: in a sense, every nation is the product of nationalism. And so is the hero of the nation: a product of interaction with other heroes or even with his own counter-image, the villain, as viewed from the opposite side. Some examples are the cases of Germán Gamazo, José Sanjurjo Sacanell, José María Gil-Robles or Lluís Companys / José Antonio Aguirre.

Despite the open definition of the hero underpinning the broad range of selected cases, little or almost no attention has been given to women. The female heroine appears only once, to the end, and not as a real protagonist but as a theatre character shaped by the literary pen of the founding father of Basque nationalism, Sabino Arana. Given the focus on the Spanish context, with no lack of contributions by women to various heroic episodes of national or subnational history, the invisibility of women in the volume is unfortunate. At the outset, as a female reader I felt somehow uncomfortable with the subject – heroes and villains of the Nation –, which I identified as a masculine bias on history. But once I

started reading, this prejudice rapidly vanished. This book offers so much more than just portraits of selected heroes and villains. Instead, in many respects, it contributes to a better understanding of our 21st century which we naively thought of as post-heroic. Nevertheless, for a second edition, I kindly make a call for a fairer share for women. Whether in the role of heroines or villains.

*Christiane Stallaert
University of Antwerp*