



The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars
in European Experiences and Memories

Workshop Report:

**The Experiences and Memories of War in European
Comparison: (Trans)national and Interdisciplinary
Approaches**

European Academy, Berlin, 10th and 11th November 2005

Convener:

DFG-AHRC Project Group 'Nations, Borders and Identities: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in European Experience and Memories' (Technical University, Berlin, Berlin College for Comparative European History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, York University)

Report:

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Wars are a universal historical phenomenon and they have had a crucial shaping influence upon the European history. Regarded as a traumatic event, an extreme eruption and apocalyptic catastrophe, they belong to the central collective experience of human communities, whose cultural memory they thereafter form. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars from 1792 to 1815 represent a particular focal point for European memory well into the twentieth century due to their economic, political and social consequences.

In the last decade historians and social scientists have become increasingly interested in the interdependent relationship between experience, memory and war. However, the main focus has until now been largely upon the twentieth century and the two world wars. In comparison, the experience and memory of the wars of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth have been neglected.

The Anglo-German project group 'Nations, Borders, Identities: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in European Experiences and Memories' (NBI) aims to close this gap in the research through a comparative and transnational analysis of the experience and memory of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. To achieve this end a series of Workshops and conferences has been planned. The research network is led by Karen Hagemann (Project management, Technical University Berlin/University of Chapel Hill, Department of History), Richard Bessel (University of York, Department of History), Alan Forrest (University of York, Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies), Etienne François (Technical University Berlin, French Centre), Hartmut Kaelble (Humboldt University Berlin, Berlin College for Comparative European History, BKVGE), Arnd Bauerkämper (Free University Berlin, BKVGE) und Jane Rendall (University of York, Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies).

On 1 November 2004 the state of existing research was discussed at the first workshop at the Military Research Centre Potsdam (see H-Soz-u-Kult for the report). The Potsdam workshop made it clear that a central problem for a European comparative lay in the danger of such a project becoming merely a summation of existing national and regional studies. The second workshop, organized by Karen Hagemann and Ruth Leiserowitz (BKVGE), was held on 10th and 11th November 2005 in the European Academy Berlin and attended by 35 scholars from across Europe and the USA. It aimed to address the problems raised by the first workshop and to discuss the potential theoretical and methodological parameters for a complex comparison of national, regional, individual and collective war experiences and memories. The difficulties for such a project are illustrated by the differences in the terminology. The concepts of „Erfahrung“, *experience*, *expérience*, *Gedächtnis* and *Erinnerung*, *memory*, *mémoire*, *pamjat* or *wspomnienia* have different meanings. Ten participants presented an overview of both historical and cultural examinations of the experience and memory of warfare. They simultaneously gave an insight into the national cultures of memory. Finally, each

paper reinforced the point that such concepts are shaped within specific national contexts.

Regional and national borders changed many times both during and after the wars. Therefore, the analysis of regional experiences and memories, which were central for regional and national as well as transnational identity formation, is of particular importance for a comparative European history. Alan Forrest, head of the British research group on war experiences, commented that a sharper understanding of regional and nation patterns of identity was equally important for each country in a transnational examination of *Erfahrung*, *Experience*, *Expérience*. The variety and complexity of regional identity mirrors the problem of reaching an exact understanding of the concepts of 'nation' and 'region'. This is especially so in border regions. Forrest commented that constructions of national identity often have little to do with individual self-identification. Instead, they are more often the result of state propaganda and abstract idealism. Etienne François commented that the French historians Philippe Joutard and Jean Clément Martin had pointed the way to such histories of '*région-mémoire*' and that this perspective should be integrated into the project. Apart from regional differences, Alan Forrest also pointed to the commonalities in supra-regional and transnational war experiences. Forrest pointed to feelings of homesickness, or *Heimwiesh*, felt by soldiers from all over Europe as an example of this shared experience.

Horst Carl (Giessen University, Institute for History) discussed the state of research in relation to the German-speaking lands and provided an overview of the genesis of the concept of 'war experiences'. Carl, a member of the Giessen SFB research centre on 'cultures of memory', illustrated the relevance of a methodological and theoretical bridge between experience and memory. Between the historical-experience approach and the concept of cultural memory there is no qualitative or systematic difference, no breach or contrast, but a rather a great theoretical and methodological convergence.

Hans Medick (Max Planck Institute for History, Göttingen) illustrated this macrohistorical perspective of interdependence between experience and memory through a microhistorical examination of the Thirty Years War. Medick's sources forcibly demonstrated the close relationship between the memory of past wars, the experience

of current armed conflict, the expectations of future wars and patterns of meaning. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792 to 1815) were therefore seen as a repeat of the Thirty Years War. One hundred years later Charles de Gaulle described the First and Second World Wars as a second Thirty Years War. In the same vein, contemporaries in the seventeenth century made sense of armed conflict via religious patterns of meaning and interpreted it through reference to ancient world and the Peloponnesian War. The present is experienced (and made bearable) through the filter of the past and conditions future memories, interpretations, images and narratives. These memories, interpretations, images and narratives themselves are in constant flux and are equally evident in all European countries and regions.

Jörg Echternkamp (Military Historical Research Centre, Potsdam) reconstructed this historical cycle through the example of German collective memories of the First World War *after* the experience of the Second World War. He argued that it was only after the end of the Second World War that the First World War became the dominant model of interpretation in the memory of the West German population. Thereafter it was superimposed on successive changes of meaning in memories of the Second World War. Echternkamp's example demonstrated clearly how collective memory lacks static, linear or predictable principles.

Medick's and Echternkamp's papers exemplified a wider transnational commonality: Historical images were and are often (de)constructions and realignments of former patterns of experience and memory, in which many agents participate. In this manner the experience of armed conflict in the seventeenth century, which was initially described as a five year, then ten year and finally fifteen year war, was reworked through cultural processing and under the influence of a successive 'humanistic outbidding topoi' (Medick) until it became *the* Thirty Years Wars. This makes clear the importance of critical reflection upon the form that memories take and interweaving of memory, history and forgetting. This applies to not only to the 'mainstream' national history writing, but also to the blocking, displacement, conflict and forgetting of memories. Only in this manner can the project free itself from national paradigms of memory.

In France, the birthplace of every-day (*Alltagsgeschichte*) and mentality history, research into *mémoire* has a long tradition. Etienne François, who sketched the

development and present state of research into memory, pointed to the early work of Henri Bergson and Marcel Proust. However, he noted that this work dealt largely with the perspective of the individual. This changed with the appearance between the wars of Maurice Halbwach's incomplete work, *Les Cadres Sociaux*. He proposed that individual memory can only be understood within the context of collective structures. At first this hypothesis attracted little attention, but it ultimately decisively influenced future research agendas. By the end of the 1970s and the 1980s French historians dominated the field of historical memory. Particularly influential was the notion of '*lieux de mémoire*', developed by Pierre Nora between 1984 and 1992 in seven edited volumes, which ran to a total of 5000 pages. The works discussed the symbolism of the French nation and stimulated a series of further projects in other European countries, such as Germany and Britain.

Within the framework of this methodological and theoretical discussion on the categories of '*Gedächtnis*', '*memory*', '*mémoire*', Astrid Erll (Giessen University, Institute for English) spoke of the 'milestones' in British concepts and studies of war and memory. Her paper showed that Great Britain, next to France and Germany, also has a well-developed research into memory. Erll stressed the necessity for a theoretical approach to the study of memory, war and the military and criticized the empirical obsession of many military historians. She argued it was necessary for various historical and cultural approaches to be united. A differentiated, comparative history of European experience and memory must refer equally to 'experience from above' – or 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm/Ranger) - as well as theories of myths and media or psychological questions.

Christina Kleiser (University of Vienna / BKGGE) also indicated in her paper on Avishai Margalit's work, *The ethics of memory (2004)*, the necessity of engaging with theoretical concepts as well as the exceptional importance of integrating interdisciplinary approaches to research into experience and memory. Her paper illustrated that there is an existential dimension inherent in research into individual and collective experience and memory.

Alexander Martin (University of Oglethorpe, Atlanta) commented in his paper on Russian and Soviet memories of the Napoleonic Wars, that this field was under-

researched. This is especially so within interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives. Martin argued that historians had yet to go beyond traditional historiographical perspectives. The national-historical emphasis upon the military dimension of the war was a consequence of a sustained search for an identity. The recourse to the Napoleonic wars has been of particular importance for Russian (or Soviet) identity. The memory of the great 'Patriotic War' was used in an instrumental manner by different political groupings.

The Spanish case demonstrated the multidimensional nature of collective memory. As much as in Russia, the memory of the war against Napoleon on the peninsular was celebrated as a cathartic experience, as a war of liberation. José Alvarez Junco (Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, Madrid) illustrated this in his paper on Spanish memory. Junco clarified the existence of several different meanings of the Napoleonic Wars in Spain. During the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s both the Republicans and Nationalists claimed the mantle of war of liberation and declared their conflict to be a repetition of the war of independence.

If in the search for a Spanish national identity, the Napoleonic Wars were seen as a religious war and the Corsican himself ascribed the role of archnemesis, in the Polish context memories of Napoleon were overwhelmingly positive. Andrezej Nieuważny (Copernicus University Toruń / Pultusk High School of Humanities) demonstrated this through an examination of the still-living cult of Napoleon in Poland. Nieuważny claimed that Polish memories of Napoleon are generally more positive and less ambivalent than in France. Napoleon himself served as a projection of Polish desires for their own national state. The Polish admiration of Napoleon finds symbolic expression through the national anthem which, uniquely in Europe, mentions him in person.

In the closing round table discussion Jane Rendall (University of York), Richard Bessel (University of York) and Arnd Bauerkämper (BKVGE) commented on the result of the workshop. It was the unanimous opinion of the podium that the papers and closing discussion had clearly illustrated the relevance of the subject. The participants were also united in their belief that many central questions required further discussion. Jane Rendall noted that gender perspective had for a long time been inadequately integrated into the theoretical and methodological discussion of the history of experience and

memory. This aspect was also mentioned several times by Karen Hagemann during the workshop discussions and represents an extremely important theoretical desideratum. Karen Hagemann went on to stress in the final discussion how an analysis of experience reveals the presence of gender differences within the sources. However, within the media of communicative and cultural memory these differences were pushed to the periphery and allowed to fall into oblivion as the male perspective became dominant and shaped cultural memory.

Richard Bessel argued in his closing statement that the experience of war is undoubtedly painful and traumatic. The death and shock, mutilation and privation that accompany warfare shape collective memory. Yet we should also not forget that wars were also bound up with *positive* experience and imaginings. The 'pleasures of war' (Graham Dawson) cut across Western European 'cultures of memory', as well as Central, Southern and Eastern Europe. Wars are also linked to the experience of victory and heroism. They provide the basis for group and individual identities. They enable self-identification, adventure, the experience of sex, drugs, smoking and travel to foreign lands. Whether seen as a positive experience at the time or later, they have shaped patterns of memory and the 'pleasure culture of war' is reflected in a variety of media (theatre, books and festivals) throughout Europe. An examination of war tourism and border crossings offers a point of approach for a transnational comparison and *histoire croisée*.

Arnd Bauerkämper argued in his closing commentary that experience is an aggregate of memory. Its analysis requires a deep understanding of the context of experience, collective and individual memory and a sharper awareness of the interface between images and analytical concepts, transnational commonalities and similarities.

The third workshop of the NBI project group entitled 'War Experiences and Identities: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Contemporary Perception' will be held on 24th and 25th February 2006 at the German Historical Institute in London. It will throw further light on the experience of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

Further information about the international research network and the project can be found on the NBI website: <http://www.nbi.tu-berlin.de/>

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