



## Chaire en histoire de la guerre

### International Conference

### HEROISMS IN TIMES OF WAR AND PERSECUTION

October 29-30, 2026

University of Quebec in Montreal

Organized by Sarah Gruszka (Sorbonne Université / EHESS), Guillaume Pinet (UQÀM) and Cécile Rousselet (Sorbonne Université / Sorbonne Nouvelle)

Since the 2000s, scholarly interest in the concept of heroism has grown to the point where some now speak of heroism studies (Efthimiou and Allison, 2017) or heroism science (Allison, Goethals and Kramer, 2017). This emerging historiographical current now has a multidisciplinary academic journal, affiliated with the University of Richmond<sup>1</sup>, research centers and even encyclopedias for American and German researchers<sup>2</sup>. Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* and the collective work *La Fabrique des héros* (Centlivres, Fabre and Zonabend, 1998) are examples of this historiographical trend, as witnessed by the recent publication of the study *Succès et échec de l'héroïsation* (Cohen and Gangloff, 2025). This dynamism, and the productions that illustrate it, testify to the interest not only of the scientific community, but also of society as a whole, in the context of the rise of presentism (Hartog, 2003) and the uncertainties that characterize the late 20th century and the early 21st century. The proliferation of commemorations that accompany today's attachment to the duty of remembrance, the upheavals in world geopolitics linked to conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East and tensions in Asia around Korea and the China Sea, as well as the return of the specter of high-intensity conflicts, all feed the search for stable landmarks, for people, real or fictional, capable of embodying a system of values or an ideal of behavior and upholding it to its highest degree. On the other hand, the attachment of current national historiographies to the heroic paradigm – particularly when it comes to emblematic figures, from Joan of Arc to Eva Perón, to light-obscure pasts such as John A. Macdonald, Hô Chi Minh or Sékou Touré, or to tragic episodes such as the two world wars and the genocides of the 20th and 21st centuries – sometimes makes

<sup>1</sup> *Heroism Science* is a peer-reviewed open source journal founded in 2016. It has published 9 volumes to date.

<sup>2</sup> *Compendium heroicum* is an online encyclopedia published by Sonderforschungsbereich 948 "Helden – Heroisierungen – Heroismen" (Collaborative Research Center "Heroes - Heroisations - Heroisms") at the University of Fribourg. In France, see the international colloquium "Succès et échec de l'héroïsation de l'Antiquité à l'actualité européenne" organized by the Chaire Jean Monnet FABER at the Université Rennes 2 on January 25-27, 2023.

heroism difficult to analyze, even from an academic perspective. Emotional reactions tinged with moralizing are sometimes evoked when questioning heroism is perceived as an almost blasphemous act.

### **The factory of heroism**

Heroism, which is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “exalted courage, intrepidity, or boldness,” has an extraordinary, hyperbolic character that justifies the use of the noun. However, Harrison Weinstein points out the lack of consensus surrounding its definition<sup>3</sup>. Many of the studies that have examined the notion note that such an exercise resists any univocal approach, since the norms and values embodied by heroism vary according to time, place and society. How, then, can we understand heroism other than in the plural, given that *heroisms* never appear except through contexts, documents and conditions that constantly redefine the issues it raises in practice? The First World War was accompanied by a “war culture” that overturned the old models of heroism (Becker and Audouin-Rouzeau, 2000). Carpet bombs and poison gas rendered individual bravery useless, while the recumbent position of soldiers and the uselessness of cavalry charges in the face of the first tanks overturned the traditional attributes of warrior heroism (Audouin-Rouzeau, 2009 and 2014). The Great War thus brought about mutations in the experience of war, leading to changes in the very appreciation of a possible heroism – both on the front and in the rear (see Campa, 2020, Loez, 2010, or Lalanne-Berdouticq, 2025).

Interest in heroism is itself subject to variations in line with historiographical dynamics. Initially linked to event history and the study of the great figures of military history, it then retreated in favor of a history of structures and the long term that emerged between the wars. It was not until the turn of the 20th to the 21st century that it was revived in the wake of the “return of the event” (Norat, 1978; Rétat, 2001; Dosse, 2010) and the bibliographical approach (Dosse, 2005), as well as renewed interest in the singularity of microhistory (Ginzburg 1980 and 1989; Ginzburg and Poni, 1981; Levi, 1989). In the martial field, it is driven by a renewed history of warfare that is now sensitive to the articulation between practices and representations (Duby, 1973; Bertaud, 1979; J. Keegan, 1976; Hanson, 1989; Lynn, 1984; Chaline, 1999; Drévilion, 2005). However, researchers are now less concerned with heroes for their own sake than with heroism and what it tells us about human groups, their values and aspirations, and the way they structure social relations (Dosse, 2010).

If we’re talking here about heroisms rather than heroes or heroines, it’s because recent thinking is less concerned with apprehending the actors, events or beneficiaries of the process than with the conditions (anthropological, social, cultural, political and historical) involved in the elaboration of heroic models, the fields of experience they reveal and the horizons of expectation they outline. Therefore heroisms must be approached as historically dated and geographically localized constructions, which are the product of a discursive process revealed by the gestures and practices that make them visible, and which promote not only an individual but, through him or her, a behavior, a social group or an idea (Duby, 1973 and 1984). The heroic act exists, in a constructivist approach, only insofar as it is put into narrative and plot (Veyne, 1971, White, 1973, Ricoeur, 1983-1985). Stories of heroism are consubstantial with the enactments of these heroisms in discursive space (Auerbach, 1946, Eco, 1976).

Certain contexts produce particular forms of heroism that need to be questioned, such as “institutional heroism”, to be contrasted with “personal/intimate heroism”. The aim of this symposium is to reflect on the normativity of heroisms, insofar as they are axiological

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. “The lack of an accepted standard definition is a major hurdle” (Weinstein, 2013, p. 2).

propositions that maintain dialectical relations with social values and practices. It examines the way in which heroisms and the imaginaries associated with them are inspired by, and at the same time participate in, the foundation of societal norms. How can their analysis help identify structural continuities or, on the contrary, reveal discontinuities in the history of the human groups that bear them and bring them to life?

### **The contribution of war and persecution to reflection on heroism**

Reflecting on the making of heroism also implies confronting it with events likely to change its dynamics. It is in this context that we will study the contexts of war and the violence and persecution that accompany it, insofar as they are conducive to the eruption of discourses and practices that valorize the heroic paradigm. In states and societies at war, the need for myths, legends and heroes – whether real or fictional – is exacerbated. Their function is to prepare minds, mobilize individuals, social groups and even nations, or to reduce dissent (Cronier and Deruelle, 2019).

In this day and age, wartime heroism seems to be taken for granted. Documentaries, popular works, and artistic works do not hesitate to resort to the notion of “Hero of War” or to praise wartime heroism<sup>4</sup>. However, studies carried out over the last twenty years or so have revealed the construction processes (institutional or otherwise) from which they derive, and the a posteriori crystallization of idealized postures they induce. Heroisms are now studied as “myths” to be deconstructed (Luigi Mascili, 2002; Charles Taylor, 1989), sometimes influenced by the history of sensibilities and “military virility” (Corbin, Courtine, Vigarello, 2011). A deconstruction that may have been operated by the actors of the past themselves to revive or free themselves from old heroisms, to think or rethink their identity by renewing their heroic models (Pinet, 2025). Heroisms are also considered in terms of the action or passivity of individuals at war (Forrest, 2002; Conte, 2011), behaviors such as altruism or denunciation, or the construction of the epic (Braudy, 2005). In his inaugural lecture at the international symposium organized by the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising in 2022, “Heroism and Violence during the Second World War”, Roger Griffin pondered the “sacralization” of violence to which the heroic models of the Third Reich contributed (Griffin, 2022). Recent historiography has therefore also focused on the shadow side of heroism. In this sense, the “return of the heroes” (i.e. Heller, 2009) is one of the privileged fields of retreat from the heroic paradigm.

The social sciences have also contributed to an evolving appreciation of this protean phenomenon. These include studies in literature and philosophy (Gaucher, 1994; Poulain Gautret, 2005; Castillo, 2011; Worms, 2009) and psychology, from the second half of the 20th century onwards (Franco, Blau and Zimbardo, 2011). The works produced in the wake of Stanley Milgram’s resounding experiment were already giving food for thought about the postures adopted in times of war. More recently, several works have examined the acts and discourses of heroism in these crisis contexts from a multidisciplinary perspective (e.g. Scheipers, 2014). Reflection has also been nourished by an approach concerning the materiality of violence on the body and allows us to envisage new questions on “heroic” positioning, notably in the context of the Napoleonic wars (Dwyer and Ryan, 2012) or more recently the exhibition “With Blind Steps” proposed by Judith Lengart at the Mamuta Art and Research Center (Jerusalem).

Finally, many studies address heroism in paradoxical contexts. Such is the case with academic reflections on heroism and childhood (Maslinskaya, 2017; Audoin-Rouzeau 1993, Pignot, 2012 or Levy-Bertherat and Zamour, 2020) or romanticized as in Ahmadou Kourouma’s novel *Allah n’est pas obligé*, about child soldiers in Liberia, where the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the collection edited by Ariane Charton, *Petit éloge de l’héroïsme*, Paris, Folio, 2017.

Donquichottesque posture reinterrogates the very construction of a childhood heroism. These questions, like those surrounding heroism and gender, interrogate “borderline situations”, and thus the contours of a notion that emancipates itself from the often-stereotyped frameworks in which it has long been used, and often still is today.

In these processes of constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing heroism, periods of war play a special role. The “noise” of their exceptional events brings to light phenomena that are otherwise difficult to see (Duby, 1973). They thus function as “operators of legibility” (Cornelia Brink and Olmo Götz, 2022), revealing the foundations of societies and their cultures. While interest in “wartime heroism” is therefore not new, it is still often studied through the lens of particular figures, such as José de San Martín, O’Connell, Jawaharlal Nehru or Mandela, respectively fathers of the Argentine, Irish, Indian and South African Nations (Navarro García, 1999; Colantonio, 2023 ; Zachariah, 2004, Lodge, 2006), specific contexts such as the Crusades (Almeida, 2007), the Wars of Religion (El Kenz, 1997, 2008; Apostolidès, 2004) or the French Revolution (Gainot, 2017), or singular cultures such as chivalric culture (Deruelle, 2015) and Bushido (Carbonnier, 2018; Pelletier, 2023) without being the subject of a systematic, global approach. Although limited in their ambition, a few studies question the construction of discourses on heroism in plural contexts and from a transnational and diachronic perspective (Deruelle and Vissiere, 2021). They testify to the value of this approach, at the heart of this symposium, in deconstructing its foundations.

#### « GUERROÏSMES – WAR/OISMS »

This is the subject of the “GUERROÏSMES – WAR/OISMS” project, organized in partnership with the Groupe de Recherche en Histoire de la Guerre, which is working on these issues as part of its ‘Pratiques et représentations de la guerre’ project. The aim is to consider, with the necessary hindsight, not so much the manifestations deemed “heroic” in times of war, but rather the fabrications of heroism and its specificities in the martial context. By considering these as complex phenomena, involving a variety of actors, tools and horizons of expectation that are sometimes irreducible or competing, we aim to decipher the elaboration of imaginary images of martial heroism, to distinguish ruptures, evolutions, temporal and spatial particularities or, on the contrary, constants, while constantly confronting them with the practices – discursive, martial or commemorative – through which they crystallize. What do times of war do to heroism? How specific are these mechanisms of elaboration? How do these positive models compare with the reality of combat and the atrocities of war? Conversely, in what way does the refinement of the heroic paradigm shed new light on the act of war, and even renew our understanding of the history, culture and sensitive world in which they are rooted? Does the diversity of contexts of violence make it possible to write a history of heroism in the face of turmoil?

The colloquium and, more broadly, the “GUERROÏSMES” project, are intended to provide some answers to these questions by laying the groundwork for an in-depth, three-part study:

#### **Focus 1. Heroism in theory: defining the notion and understanding the making of discourses on heroism**

One focus will be on questions of **definition**. The aim is to identify the various meanings of heroism in the context of war, according to discipline, era, space and culture. How, under what conditions and by which actors, military or civilian (Jouhaud, 2000), were these different definitions elaborated? What references (historical, literary, religious) and legacies did they draw on? How do they differ from other notions such as honor or reputation, and how does the making of heroes differ from that of martyrs or saints (secular or otherwise) (Chovanec, 2020)?

Particular attention will be paid to the contexts in which these heroisms have been thought of, the forms they take (masculine, feminine, animal), the functions attributed to them and their reception and appropriation: in what circumstances have the meanings of heroism been inflected? Do they relate specifically to notions of crisis and modernity, to moments of violence, and to discourses of subalternity, giving rise to particular “discursive formations” (Foucault, 1970) depending on social contexts and power relations? What place does the heroic paradigm occupy in each culture? To what extent is it permeable to societal evolutions? Through what channels have these different definitions of heroism been conveyed and perpetuated?

By carefully exploring these questions and the ways in which heroism is narrated, we will seek to identify the specific characteristics of heroism and its evolution over time and space. Ultimately, it will be possible to better understand how “war heroism” differs from other forms of heroism, and how it has influenced the representations of contemporaries and historians. The forms of heroism, studied from a diachronic point of view, according to genres, media and spaces (places, objects, cultural fields), will then enable us to analyze the very mechanisms of this “manufacture” of heroic discourses in wartime.

This exploration will take both a chronological and thematic approach. The aim is to establish a **typology of discourses on heroism in wartime**, highlighting several pairs that are both complementary and antinomic: collective/individual heroism; military/civilian heroism; sacred/fallen hero; fictional/real heroism; hero/victim; hero/non-hero/anti-hero. How do these different discourses interact? Are the theoretical and methodological tools for thinking about these plural forms of discourse the same?

Particular attention will be paid to the origins of the heroic qualification: which actors or institutions attribute, and work to impose, this status in contexts of war and persecution? According to what logics and what stakes? These questions call for a detailed exploration of the **functions of heroism** in various respects (historical, social, ideological, psychological). It will involve questioning how heroisms are constructed and thought about in relation to the official discourses (Gruszka, 2019) or norms (Oestreich, 1982; Drévilion, 2002) that focus on them. Finally, in this reflection on the auctoriality of heroic qualification, we will also be interested in the phenomena of heroic self-identification and imposture.

This reflection will enable us to imagine a **cartography of the “words of heroism”**, illustrating the terminology associated with these phenomena.

## **Focus 2. Heroism in practice in contexts of violence**

If the notion of heroism can be defined through the discourses and commentaries that fabricate it, these must also be confronted with the particular reality of violence in the contexts studied. This axis therefore aims to put the model to the test of war. How have they shaped manifestations of heroism? But also, in return, to what extent do they enrich, inflect or even deconstruct our representations of the heroic paradigm?

Drawing on several eras, geographical areas and disciplines enables us to think in a variety of ways, offering the possibility of a “hermeneutic of defamiliarization” (Lavocat, 2012). A comparative approach will therefore inform this study of “heroisms” in times of war and persecution. Taking a transnational approach, we will show that heroisation processes, far from having the same modalities and rhythms everywhere, proceed from phenomena of asynchrony, regionalization and provincialization (Grataloup, 2014). These reveal the interplay of temporal and geographical scales that give plural appreciations to concrete manifestations of heroism (Revel, 1996). By taking them into account, we seek to identify dynamics of influence, mutual enrichment and displacement (comic book heroes becoming heroines in cinema, for example).

This cross-disciplinary perspective allows several specific questions to emerge. Do all societies have heroes in the context of war? Can heroism exist without heroes? Does heroism necessarily need to be embodied in deeds? What links does heroism have with the media without which it remains invisible to society? What of ordinary heroism, of “heroes in spite of themselves”, of acts committed according to the imperatives of duty, obedience to orders, even threats, rather than liberal initiative? The question of **individual and collective motivations** for action in times of war needs to be explored in depth. Why act? Can this choice be disinterested, or does it inevitably stem from an expectation – that of recognition or retribution? How and why are someone’s actions elevated to the level of heroic deeds?

The aim of this theme is to understand how confrontation with multiple contexts leads us to think differently about the notion of heroism.

### **Focus 3. Heroism: a current and operative notion?**

This section looks at the contemporary use of the notion of heroism. To what extent does it persist in the 21st century, both for writing and for thinking about and remembering heroic deeds?

On the one hand, we are in an era of **desacralization of heroes**, in which discourses on sacrifice and the glorification of exploits are outdated, if not out of place. In this obsolescence of heroism, we need to distinguish between a global trend and more particular affections for certain figures. In this respect, we need to look at the process of debunking fallen heroes and what we might call the phenomenon of heroes’ obsolescence.

On the other hand, it has to be said that the current context – the return of war in Syria, Ukraine and the Middle East, and tensions in Africa and Asia - seems to make heroes relevant once again, and, like a natural reflex, bring a recourse to heroisation. In fact, this applies both to contemporary contexts, through the identification of new heroes, and to older contexts, through the summoning of “immortal heroes”. Why do we continue to speak of Leonidas, Boucicaut or Bayard? How can we explain the enduring nature not only of certain heroes, but also of heroisation, which seems to operate like a reflex in wartime, despite cultural evolutions? To what extent is heroism still operative today?

In this exploration of current heroism, particular attention will be paid to **museography and pantheonization practices** featuring heroes of yesterday and today.

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The symposium is also intended as a workshop for methodological reflection. The aim is to develop tools for approaching these issues in a cross-disciplinary way, by bringing together specialists from different periods and disciplines – history, sociology, political sociology, psychology, anthropology, literature, the arts, etc. – in a dialogue. We intend to transcend not only geographical, but also chronological boundaries, and also work on periods of caesura, which are often overlooked. In so doing, the aim is to build up a network of researchers interested in these issues, a network that will develop and become institutionalized as the project, conceived over the long term and in several stages, expands.

The symposium will be held at the Université du Québec à Montréal on October 29 and 30, 2026. Proposals for papers (1500 characters), in English or French (passive comprehension of both languages is required), accompanied by a brief curriculum vitae, should be sent by **May 1, 2025**, electronically to:

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***Please note.*** Wherever possible, the organizers will endeavour to provide transport and accommodation for symposium participants. However, all those who can secure their own funding, through their universities or research centers, are invited to make this known when submitting their proposals. The existence of such external funding (even if not yet secured) is an important prerequisite for the general grant application that will be submitted for the organization of the colloquium.

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