

# Victors and Vanquished in Europe

Constructions and historical postures

## Author-s:

[Catherine HOREL](#) [1]

## Abstract

The distinction between the victors and the vanquished, arising from the many conflicts which have marked European history, has not been stable over the long-term. The perception that both groups have of victory and defeat is not linear. The postures of different groups are constructed, with memorial traces varying based on the period. The figures of the victor and the vanquished have evolved based on their confrontation with events and accounts. The enemy—whether absolute or conventional—becomes hereditary, affected by stereotypes that shape its identity. The explanation for defeat is inseparable from the person of the traitor and the discourse on betrayal. It therefore seems appropriate to explore defeat, running counter to a history which is often built on victories, or even on defeats transformed into triumphs. Victor-heroes stand alongside vanquished-martyrs. Surrender and enemy occupation of territory call for revenge. Beyond their actual content, peace treaties are interpreted in varying fashion by the vanquished and the victors. The resulting territorial recompositions create minorities of the vanquished among the victors.

---

## Article

The history of major European nations was constructed on victories whose ambiguity has been ignored or distorted. The vanquished are either excluded from memory or demonized. While this can be confirmed in certain European countries (France, England, Spain, Russia), the situation is more unstable for the territories which they conquered (Ireland, Caucasus). In other cases, defeats are seen through the lens of a mythicized ancient past (Arminius in Germany, the Roman conquest in Italy, Greece), or interpreted and promoted as powerful identity factors (Central Europe, Balkans). The Battle of Alesia, for example, constructed and unified the French nation *a posteriori*. Jean-Louis Brunaux has shown, contrary to what nationalist historiography has affirmed, that it was Caesar himself who provided, by erecting Alesia as a victory, the elements for the construction of the myth, namely Gaulish resistance and aggressive Romanization.

Defeat does not necessarily result from military confrontations. It can be the consequence of an insurrection or a revolution suppressed internally or—more frequently—externally. Civil war (Spain, Greece, Ireland) involves the clash between two political projects with varying amounts of support from external powers, whose outcome turns some of its actors into the vanquished, who must now cohabit or go into exile, while the victims are considered as martyrs. This type of defeat combines different factors that later take on meaning in collective memory surrounding the participants and opponents of the revolt, the latter becoming “collaborators” with the repressive power, whether it be of local or foreign essence. This power is subsequently seen as doubly illegitimate, as it was not imposed on the field of battle, but rather through the betrayal of a portion of the national community, and through the use of disproportionate military means. The challenging of Soviet totalitarianism (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968) are two examples. The exile is a vanquished person who is also uprooted, and whose experience is different and even contradictory to that of the people who stayed

behind. Like defeat, exile can be collective (governments in exile during the two world wars) or individual, although in both cases it is about refusing defeat. In order to contend with this and continue the struggle—at the risk of a new defeat—the vanquished choose to resist internally or externally. In the countries that fell under Soviet domination in 1945, former combatants from outside were quickly eliminated by internal members of the resistance and “Muscovites” who had been exiled to the Soviet Union. Revenge gave rise to a new group of the vanquished, who aspired to continue the struggle.

## Representations and interpretations



Photography of Pesti Srác2, 31st october 1956, Budapest.

Source: [Fortepan](#) [3]

It has often been believed that the victors alone used defeat as a tool. The dominant historiographies have for a long time been those of the victors, at the risk of silencing certain aspects which are sometimes less glorious. For example, the vanquished cannot write their own account, either because the victor's government of occupation or enslavement does not deem them capable, or because it dissuades them from doing so. As Victor Hugo remarked about Napoleon's Russian campaign, one can be “defeated by one's conquest.” Such a reversal characterizes a certain number of military initiatives in Europe (the Ottoman Empire, Napoleon and Hitler's Russian campaigns). It generates resistance on the part of the vanquished or those targeted by the conquest (who do not necessarily fight), which often follows defeat and later takes its place in collective memory. This can be shared by a number of populations subjugated by the same invader, as was the case with Balkan accounts, facing a common Turkish enemy. The religious dimension plays a major role here, for the enemy is necessarily a pagan or an infidel, cruel and barbarous, crushing the Christian spirit of the nation. The desire for conquest and the ambition of expansionism encountered strong resistance, while invasion, territorial dismemberment, and subjugation of the population took part in a victory founded on violence. Defeat was thus not just military but political, social, and cultural. The longer the conquest endured and took root, the more the *a posteriori* memorial construction emphasized submission and glorified the defeat that was at its origin. Only national awakening could reverse the course of history, which is why defeat continues to serve political ends up to the present. The Battle of Kosovo Polje (1389) constituted a powerful identity-based foundation for Serbia which Slobodan Milošević used to base his power on and initiate the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It also made permanent the figure of the enemy—either eternal or inseparably connected to national existence—who either assumed the features of a barbarian, or those of the conqueror whose superiority was only numerical and technological. Antagonistic couples formed in this way, spanning across European history. While the figure of the implacable enemy constructed national imaginations, this is not only false over the short-term of the conflict, but also over the long-term, because of cross-border permeability and geopolitical evolution. In the Balkans for example, the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire was replaced by the survival of Muslim and/or Turkish-speaking populations in the successor countries, living witnesses of the former subjection who are wrongfully presented as being foreign. Some reconciliations are possible only in the face of another enemy, or when the two parties have a shared ambition. European construction attenuated these oppositions, even though historical stereotypes and memories cast their shadow over certain discourses.

Not admitting defeat produces attitudes which vary according to the situations imposed by the victors, who can be occupiers against whom one continues to fight through military and clandestine civilian means, as in the case of France after the German occupation of 1940, or Yugoslavia after

1941. Populations can therefore become victims without being defeated on the field, a situation experienced by “small nations,” which the victor seizes without bloodshed and occupies. Passive resistance characterizes long-term occupations. It can be explained by the fear of disappearing, the country becoming a province belonging to another state. The defeat becomes definitive by the country being wiped off the map, or through the assimilation of the population, which loses its identity. This was the case for Poland after the partition of the late eighteenth century, or with the Baltic countries. This trauma in turn became part of historical awareness, and is shared by numerous European territories over the *longue durée*. Defeat extended over the long-term, as in the Ottoman conquest, provides an interpretation of history between two temporal markers: a glorious Middle Ages and a promising modernity that bookend the darkness of the occupation. The account of occupation revolves around an “entry” (the defeat) and an “exit” (victory), whereas these two are rarely inscribed so neatly in the chronology.

## Victory without battle

The victor is not necessarily an occupier, and the combat may take place far from the territory, and so defeat is seen as particularly unjust, giving rise to the feeling in the subjected person of having been defeated “by disqualification.” This was the experience of the Central Powers in 1918. From this disembodied defeat of sorts was born the myth of the “enemy within,” a foreigner or one supposed to be such, who betrays the nation by “selling” it to an external power. The “stab in the back” (*Dolchstoß*) on which Hitler founded a part of his geopolitical vision is one of its expressions. Defeat had to be erased and transformed into the definitive victory of Germany. As a result, the Reich that he intended to construct “for a thousand years” took its place in a mythical duration which was vague but sufficiently long to reach eternity. Germany must never again experience defeat, which explains the fury of the Führer and a part of his entourage in fighting to the very end, even if it meant preferring annihilation (suicide) to defeat.

When defeat remains inexplicable—one is reluctant to acknowledge the failure of the general staff, the fortifications, or the political elite—it can be attributed to the traitor(s) who conspired for it. In this case it involves people that can be identified, generally soldiers onto whom political decision-makers transfer the blame, or groups which “went to the enemy,” or members of a “fifth column” undermining defence initiatives. In multinational empires, the accusation inevitably falls on the representatives of peoples deemed to be disloyal, because of their hostility to the central authority which conquered them in the past. The face of the traitor emerges on both side of the border. The worst traitor was the one who could not be assimilated into the nation, or that the nation did not want to admit into its midst: this was the case for Jews in Hungary during the interwar period, and especially in Nazi Germany, where their elimination became a biological necessity of victory. The traitor was represented as a foreign element—which he sometimes was—which the nation had to combat in order not to perish. The image of being surrounded, or of a fortress besieged by external enemies, was a recurrent one in war propaganda.

## Martyrology and memorial construction



[4]

"Battle of Nations Memorial in Leipzig.

Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)" [5]

Armistices and surrenders bring an end to conflict by separating the adversaries into vanquished and victors. While armistice can sometimes be deemed necessary in order to plan for a resumption of

combat, surrender remains unthinkable because it is synonymous with betrayal. For example, Napoleon accepted individual surrender, but not that of the army corps. Only death on the field of battle remained honorable and made it possible to exalt the figure of the martyr. Death was sometimes not very glorious, but death in combat was always rewritten and reactivated. The martyr is thus the opposite of the traitor in the representation of defeat, which he or she transforms into victory. This is the meaning that Miklós Molnár gave to the French title of his book on the Hungarian revolution of 1956, *Victoire d'une défaite* [Victory of a Defeat, English title *Budapest 1956: a history of the Hungarian revolution*]. The notion of victory over the long-term was a constant in the collective unconscious of Central Europe, making the regular reactivation of the martyrs and vanquished of earlier times possible. The martyr can therefore simultaneously be both the vanquished and the victor. The setbacks of history can sometimes overthrow power relations. For example, the peace treaties of 1918-1920 established victors that the interwar period would lower to the status of vanquished. The states which succeeded the Habsburg Empire were divided between victors and vanquished, with the first group being built on the exclusion of those who did not adhere to the discourse imposed by the authorities. Many citizens were defeated individuals living within a community of victors. The impossibility of creating a new national community was a sign of the fragility of these national constructions and of their defeat in the short-term. The "victory" of 1918 did not succeed in creating nations whose citizens shared the same historical narrative. Edvard Beneš was seen as a victor in 1918 but as the vanquished in 1938, and even more so in 1948. The Munich Agreement in September 1938 established the revenge of the vanquished (Germany, and later Hungary).

Heroes, who are inseparable from victories and defeats, can appear with the characteristics of both the victor and the vanquished, and in the second case are similar to the martyr. The hero is someone who makes victory possible, or who lessens the sense of defeat. Heroes can be fleeting and transitory, sometimes appearing only in a particular episode of the war, insurrection, or revolution. Over the long-term, heroes can assume different appearances according to the ideology using them. For example, numerous heroes from the Central European Middle Ages were presented by post-1945 communist historiography as precursors of the coming of socialism, and consequently as victors before their time in the dialectic of the proletariat's victory. Noble elites were at the same time accused of putting their class interest before that of the nation, and were thus categorized with the traitors.

The victor-vanquished dichotomy emerged as fundamental in memorial construction. It serves to affirm national identity, but also raises problems when these categories intersect within a single national community. This is the case with the territorial recompositions following wars which displace populations of former victors, who now become the vanquished. National minorities feel defeated by history, and are seen as potential traitors by the victorious nation. While the victorious state can position itself as the conqueror by seeking either to eliminate or assimilate them, they develop an attitude of active or passive resistance which betrays the refusal of defeat and the victor's law. Most of the time, the state obscures their memory, which is not consistent with memorial construction. This was the case with the Alsatian-Mosellians who enlisted in the Wehrmacht, or with the Czechoslovakian legionnaires, who were presented in the discourse of the new state created in 1918 as victors; this was in comparison to the majority of Czechs and Slovaks who loyally fought in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army during World War One, and whose memory was out of step with the one that Czechoslovakia imposed in breaking with the Habsburg past.

The right of the victor exerts itself not only on the battlefield, but also on the map and over the long duration of occupation or conquest. Western European nations enjoyed this possibility by superimposing on the memory and cultures of conquered peoples a national narrative which was "stronger" because more centralized, and subsequently victorious over "weaker" particularities

(absence of the state, internal rivalries, territorial fragility). The victor thinks of the long term (Napoleon, Hitler and his millennial Reich, Stalin), whereas the defeated envisions a short term which leaves hope for a reversal of the situation, or at least a return to the *status quo ante*. The chronology of conflicts brings about successive phases of alternating victories and defeats. For example, in his appeal on June 18, 1940, General de Gaulle asserted that the loss of a battle did not mean that the outcome of the war should end in defeat. The vanquished aspire to become victors, who in turn cannot imagine defeat. The Napoleonic wars are an illustration of the alternating situations of victor-vanquished, which can leave lasting memories according to their vicissitudes. For the Poles or Slovenians, they represented a moment of victory (reconstitution of Poland, or a state-like constitution for Southern Slavs with the Illyrian provinces (1809-1813)). In the rest of Europe, the Napoleonic episode—which followed the French Revolutionary Wars—on the contrary meant the devastation and anguish of defeat. As a result, it was later reinterpreted in a national sense by different groups. The most revealing example is the construction of the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal*, which was inaugurated in October 1913 to commemorate the centenary of Leipzig's "battle of nations." Behind the semblance of a transnational discourse ("all united against Napoleon"), it was Germany which imposed its vision of the event in an anachronistic and unilateral interpretation.

Commemorative ceremonies have only very recently included the belligerents of the enemy camp. The national dimension of victory or defeat was emphasized through the organization of events to which the Allies were invited. Invitations to former adversaries most often emanate from private initiatives or associations of veterans, and rarely from the state sending a national message. However, the commemorations which included Germany in Verdun in 1984, and then those at the memorial of Caen in 2004, demonstrated an evolution in the discourse of the state. One more willingly reconciles with the vanquished than with the victor. An interesting example is the invitation sent to the ambassador of Turkey by the Hungarian authorities during the commemoration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Mohács (1526), which saw the death of King Louis II Jagiellon, and whose primary consequence was the occupation of a part of the territory by the Ottomans, with the remainder falling under Habsburg domination. While national and even nationalist messages resonated with the celebration of the defeat of 1526 associated with the catastrophe of 1918-1919, it is nevertheless striking to see the vanquished put into perspective a defeat which for so long gave meaning to Hungarian narrative construction, but which in view of the trauma of 1918 seems acceptable, as it resulted from a battle and not a peace treaty imposed by faraway victors.

### **Bibliography:**

Bloch, Marc, *L'étrange défaite*, Paris, Gallimard (coll. "Folio Histoire"), 1990.

Brunaux, Jean-Louis, *Alésia. 27 septembre 52 av. J.-C.*, Paris, Gallimard (coll. "Les journées qui ont fait la France"), 2012.

Duby, Jacques, *Le dimanche de Bouvines. 27 juillet 1214*, Paris, Gallimard (coll. "Folio Histoire"), 1994.

Molnár, Miklós, *Victoire d'une défaite, Budapest 1956*, Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, 1996.

Rey, Marie-Pierre, Lentz, Thierry (eds.), *1812, la campagne de Russie*, Paris, Perrin, 2012.

---

### **Source URL:**

<https://ehne.fr/en/article/wars-and-traces-war/victors-and-vanquished-europe/victors-and-vanquished-europe>

### **Links**

[1] <https://ehne.fr/en/auteur/catherine-horel>

[2] <http://ehne.fr/sites/default/files/5nschars1956.jpg>

[3] <http://www.fortepan.hu/?img=23594>

[4] [http://ehne.fr/sites/default/files/5nsbattleofnationsmemorial\\_0.jpg](http://ehne.fr/sites/default/files/5nsbattleofnationsmemorial_0.jpg)

[5] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle\\_of\\_Nations\\_Memorial.JPG?uselang=fr](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_Nations_Memorial.JPG?uselang=fr)