

Wolfgang Hochbruck, Léna Remy-Kovach

## Les Pompiers de Notre-Dame

Before the Notre-Dame de Paris fire on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, French firefighters may justifiably have felt somewhat short-changed by history. The heroic reputation of American firefighters, already popular heroes in a tradition reaching back into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, went through the roof after the devastating losses incurred on September 11, 2001, by the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) when the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center collapsed after a terrorist attack with two airplanes, killing 343 firefighters. Closer to home, the heroic reputation of British firefighting services still rests squarely on their unflinching response to terror from the air during the German *Blitz* in 1940. By comparison, the French *sapeurs-pompiers*, though one of Europe's oldest regular fire services, had not really enjoyed a strong systemic hero status, or elevation to heroic appreciation based on a particular event. Traditionally, the claim to fame of the Paris and Marseille fire brigades had more to do with their organisational status as army (Paris) and navy (Marseille) units. Consequently, their public image is not that of individualised heroes, but of the collective “soldats du feu”, soldiers of fire, and technicians of risk-taking – thus the title of a recent book about the French fire services (Boullier/Chevrier).

Other than in the U.S. and Britain, there is likewise no graphic symbolism associated with the *pompiers* like the axe and the helmets with their elongated back for the Americans, and the flat steel helmets of the British World War II firefighters and the civilian Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS). Moreover, while there is even a *bande dessinée* devoted to *Les Pompiers*, the same holds true for other professional groups like teachers and even rugby players, and of course the figures, though amiable, are less heroic than they are, well, comical (Cazenove/Stedo).

On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, however, the *Brigade des sapeurs-pompiers de Paris (BSPP)* got a chance to catch up with their international colleagues when their relentless efforts saved the towers and much of the interior of one of the

most mythical places in French national history, the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris.

However, despite the indisputable fact that the Paris fire brigade did a remarkable job, there are, three months later, no indications that there might be a collective hero story developing as a result of the spectacular save of one of the most prominent and well-known cathedrals in the world. The closest the media got to creating a personal hero celebration were two individualised accounts of heroism – one, a priest, the other, a robot. And as far as the heroic attempts of the Paris fire brigade's *aumônier* to save sacred objects are concerned, *Le Monde* only picked up his story once the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* had already spread the word, calling him “une sorte de héros malgré lui” (*Le Monde*).

There are some lessons to be learned from this phenomenon in view of more recent heroism theory, and heroism research. Generally speaking, heroic agency is only accredited to persons (including animals), and it is situational. However, the main interfering force in the case of the Notre-Dame de Paris fire which ultimately prevented a more extensive heroification of the active – and doubtlessly heroic – participants in its extinction may have been the church itself.

This hypothesis warrants an explanation, of course. The situation called for heroic action, the storyline for heroes. However, among the participant forces in the myth-making action were not only the firefighters themselves, and of course the national as well as international media, but the French political class and their special situation at the time. The media here as everywhere else are always eager for the heroic, preferably if laced with tragedy. If a calamitous event can be personalised into a heroic individual effort, sacrifice, or even death, the marketability of the story increases accordingly. The political class constituted a set of particularly mitigating circumstances of their own. They encumbered myth-making, in so far as the Notre-Dame fire happened during a period of political unrest. So-called yellow-vest

anti-government activists were staging violent protests in Paris and other cities on a weekly basis, wreaking havoc, and not refraining from creating not just the 'normal' post-protest detritus of broken windows, burning cars, and garbage cans, but damaging other national myth sites like the Arc de Triomphe. Speculations about their involvement flared up briefly while the fire was still burning, but as quickly gave way to relief that most of the cathedral had been saved by a valiant effort in which firefighters risked their lives, but did not lose them (O'Gradaigh).

Finally there is the cathedral itself, prominent in Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire* (Nora III 3) between Vézelay and the Loire castles and one of only seven places named individually. And even though not many Parisians would describe themselves as religious, the cathedral is beyond doubt a symbolic space of considerable importance to the identity of the city, and by extension the French people (cf. Tacke).

Against this background, rumors about the cause of the fire immediately spread alongside and further than the flames themselves. The possibility that the cause of the fire had been arson rather than the more likely carelessness and stupidity of a construction worker too indolent to follow instructions and leave the premises for a smoke, was taken up by journalists and bounced around on social media. The media also jumped immediately at yet another classical Trumpism when the American president called for airplanes to throw water on the Notre-Dame roof. True, what was burning was a veritable medieval forest of hundreds of trees, converted into roof-beams centuries ago. The probable result of several tons of water dropped from a plane, however, would in all likelihood have been a structural cave-in. However, the medial damage was done, part of the debate shifted away from the fight inside the towers and on the scaffolding around them to a typical case of fake news. And of course media like the sensationalist *Daily Mail* almost immediately asked why it took firefighters so long to get at what was clearly a rapidly developing fire – a question only somebody can ask who has never dragged a full set of equipment including hoses up a narrow flight of stairs to the height at which the fire could be fought with any expectations for success.

The firefighting effort itself was conducted with quiet, collective efficiency (Haferburg). At least ten firefighters risked their lives entering into the already burning North tower and extinguishing the flames there. Their efforts are hardly visible in the news footage – an occasional colorfully dressed figure briefly showing on the outside of the tower, others seemingly stolidly pouring

water onto the flames – unless one knows what is going on, from training or experience, fighting a fire from a hoseline can look rather boring.

Heroic victimisation expectations were thwarted by a combination of professional efficiency and that bit of luck even the most skilled firefighter needs. There was nobody to be rescued, and nobody was seriously hurt, so TV stations were reduced to showing, again and again, how the steeple collapsed and disappeared onto and unfortunately also into the building, creating a hole in the ceiling and thus both destabilising the whole structure and opening a venue for burning debris to get into the choir itself.

And then the fire was out. The French sources over the next few days show a rather unified image of praise for the collective action of the BSPP. Not that there was no calling of heroes: *Paris Match*, likewise *RTL* and *France 3* channel all celebrated "pompiers héros" and "héros de sauvetage" which they saluted (*RTL*; *France 3*; *Paris Match*). The Paris-based central state reacted with alacrity: within 72 hours after the fires were cold, President Macron and Mayor Hidalgo had bestowed a medal of merit to all firefighters who had been part of the effort.

This, however, is exactly the point where the events become interesting. There is no indication that either Chief Jean-Claude Gallet or any of the ten-plus who risked everything were given preferred or special treatment or honors. Images in the press from this ceremony, which of course must have followed a certain military format and ritual (cf. Boullier/Chevrier 69), look as if they were taking active pains *not* to let the military nature show too much – France is, after all, a post-heroic society, and except for the parade on *Quatorze Juillet*, overt semblances of militarism are usually avoided. Certainly, the firefighters were not wearing their regulation gala uniforms, which might have been considered appropriate for the occasion after all (cf. Direction générale de la sécurité civile 39).

Which left only two curiosities unguarded against heroification efforts, and those came mostly from international rather than national media: the firefighting robot that the *Pompiers* deployed inside the church once officers decided that a structural cave-in was becoming too much of a danger to risk lives. By then, most of the important and (re-)movable pieces of art from inside the church had been salvaged by firefighters, including the department's chaplain. Departmental chaplains have been focal figures at least since Father Mychal Judge suffered a deadly heart attack during the 9-11 events (von Essen 219), becoming the first officially registered victim on that fateful day. Unfortunately for the media, and

a further impediment to a heroic story unfolding, Father Jean-Marc Fournier, who is a veteran of the French involvement in Afghanistan, and had been at the Bataclan terrorist attack, is not the kind of person who enjoys being made the center of attention, and even though *USA Today's* Kim Hjelmgaard tried to link him to the salvaging of Jesus' crown of thorns (Hjelmgaard), Christian mythology that would have worked wonders in the US fell flat in secular France.

Both the reluctant heroism of Father Fournier and the robot signal distances between the heroic narratives told on either side of the Atlantic. There is a marked reluctance among European firefighters to risk their lives unnecessarily. Heroic death is not one of the factors determining French firefighter identity – in fact, the mortality rate among firefighters is lower than that of the average male population (Deschamps et al. 646).

The main factor to push the heroic firefighters into the background, however, was the building itself. Notre-Dame de Paris. Other than the irredeemable World Trade Center it had survived the fire, other than the sinister and seclusive Pentagon, Notre-Dame is one of the central and almost obligatory sites to visit in all of France. It is a place, as politicians did not fail to mention, that is not just a national site of memory, but an international one. As an article in the German weekly *Die Zeit* noted, it was as if the world had caught on fire (Raether 7), and another linked Notre-Dame de Paris and other Gothic style cathedrals and their function of bringing the light into the architectural world (Greiner 48). Furthermore, in the French context the fire had placed side by side the royalist-catholic side of national memory, represented by the magnificent 13<sup>th</sup> century cathedral, and the republican-laicist side represented by the fire service (cf. Rausch 676). And in that contest, the cathedral and the concerns over its salvation, its future, and its potential restoration prevailed.

Thus, there is a logic that on April 20<sup>th</sup> already, stories about the firefighters all but stopped, and the attention turned to the rebuilding effort, money donations, and the amount of potentially poisonous lead in the environment as a result of the mediaeval roof burning. The city seal's 'fluctuat nec mergitur' has become metonymically enclosed in the myth-making, the building itself is shaken again and again by bad news and thus increasingly became the heroic character – with some martyr qualities – of the story itself.

Firefighters around the world know how difficult the job done by the BSPP was, and how lucky we were that everybody got to go home. True to style, by May 31<sup>st</sup>, the Notre-Dame fire had

not yet reached even the Wikipedia page of the Paris Fire Brigade, neither in French nor in English. But of course there was a page for the fire itself ("Incendie de Notre-Dame de Paris").

**Wolfgang Hochbruck** is Professor for North American Philology and Cultural Studies at the University of Freiburg, and Co-Director of the Freiburg Advanced Center of Education's Community of Practice. He is a lieutenant with the Denzlingen Volunteer Fire Dept., among his recent publications is a short cultural history of the American fire service (*Helden in der Not*, 2018).

**Léna Remy-Kovach** is a doctoral student in North American Studies at the University of Freiburg. Her Ph.D. thesis focuses on strategies for healing and (re)conciliation in contemporary fantasy and horror Indigenous literature from Turtle Island (Canada and the United States). Her latest publications explore Indigenous artistic activism (Impakter, Peter Lang) and the imagery of hunger and cannibalism in recent Indigenous fiction (Parlour, University of Bucharest Review), with upcoming articles on the commodification of Indigenous monsters in Euro-American horror television series (University of Michigan Press, McFarland).

## Works Cited

- Boullier, Dominique, and Stéphane Chevrier. *Les Sapeurs-Pompiers: des Soldats du Feu aux Techniciens du Risque*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000.
- Cabral, Céline. "Incendie de Notre Dame: les hommages aux pompiers, héros du sauvetage." *France 3 Paris Île-de-France*. 18 April 2019. 9 September 2019 <<https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/paris-ile-de-france/paris/incendie-notre-dame-hommages-aux-pompiers-heros-du-sauvetage-1657080.html>>.
- Cazenove, Christophe, and Stédo. *Les Pompiers*. Charnay-les-Mâcon: Bamboo, 2003ff.
- Deschamps, Sophie, et al. "Mortality amongst Paris Firefighters." *European Journal of Epidemiology* 11. 6 (1995): 643-646. 9 September 2019 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01720297>>.
- Erlande-Brandenburg, Alain. "Notre Dame de Paris." *Les Lieux de Mémoire III: Les France. 3: De L'Archive à L'Emblème*. Ed. Pierre Nora. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992: 359-401.
- Fournier, Jean-Marc. "pompiers, prêtre et héros' de l'incendie de Notre-Dame." *Le Monde*. 19 April 2019. 9 September 2019 <[https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/04/19/incendie-de-notre-dame-jean-marc-fournier-aumonier-de-la-brigade-des-sapeurs-pompiers-de-paris-et-heros-tres-discret\\_5452422\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/04/19/incendie-de-notre-dame-jean-marc-fournier-aumonier-de-la-brigade-des-sapeurs-pompiers-de-paris-et-heros-tres-discret_5452422_3224.html)>.
- Greiner, Ulrich. "Lichter der Welt." *Die Zeit* 25 April 2019: 48.
- Haferburg, Manfred. „Pariser Pompiers über den Einsatz in Notre Dame.“ 24 April 2019. 15 October 2019 <[https://www.achgut.com/artikel/pariser\\_pompiers\\_\\_ueber\\_den\\_einsatz\\_in\\_notre\\_dame](https://www.achgut.com/artikel/pariser_pompiers__ueber_den_einsatz_in_notre_dame)>.

- Hjelmgaard, Kim. "Notre Dame fire: Paris Fire Brigade Chaplain Braved the Blaze to Rescue Cathedral Treasures." *USA TODAY*. 17 April 2019. 9 September 2019 <<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/04/16/notre-dame-cathedral-art-relics-saved-fire-firefighters-crown-of-thorns-paris/3485917002/>>.
- O'Gradaigh, Pol. "Paris Honors Firefighters who Battled Notre Dame Blaze." *Firehouse*. 18 April 2019. 15 October 2019 <<https://www.firehouse.com/careers-education/news/21077058/paris-honors-firefighters-who-battled-notre-dame-blaze>>.
- "Incendie de Notre-Dame de Paris." *Wikipedia L'encyclopédie libre*. 9 September 2019. <[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incendie\\_de\\_Notre-Dame\\_de\\_Paris](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incendie_de_Notre-Dame_de_Paris)>.
- Prévost, L. "Arrêté du 8 avril 2015 fixant les tenues, uniformes, équipements, insignes et attributs des sapeurs-pompiers." *Legifrance. Le service public de la diffusion du droit*. 8 April 2015. 9 September 2019 <<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/arrete/2015/4/8/INTE1505052A/jo/texte.html>>.
- Prieur, Joel, et al. *Sapeurs-Pompiers de Paris. La fabuleuse histoire d'une brigade mythique*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2011.
- Raether, Elisabeth. "Lieder gegen das Vergehen." *Die Zeit* 17 April 2019: 7.
- Rausch, Helke. *Kultfigur und Nation. Öffentliche Denkmäler in Paris, Berlin und London, 1848–1914*. München: Oldenbourg, 2006.
- Stassiné, Léa. "Incendie à Notre-Dame de Paris: les pompiers salués en héros." *RTL*. 16 April 2019. 9 September 2019 <<https://www.rtl.fr/actu/justice-faits-divers/incendie-a-notre-dame-de-paris-les-pompiers-salues-en-heros-7797436414.html>>.
- Tacke, Charlotte. *Denkmal im sozialen Raum. Nationale Symbole in Deutschland und Frankreich im 19. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995.
- von Essen, Thomas. *Strong of Heart. Life and Death in the Fire Department of New York*. New York: Avon Books, 2002.
- Wojazer, Philippe. "Les pompiers, héros de Notre-Dame." *Paris Match*. 15 April 2019 <<https://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Societe/Les-pompiers-heros-de-Notre-Dame-de-Paris-contre-les-flammes-1618621>>.