The History and Memory of the Marburg Uprising of 1809 and the Napoleonic Wars in Hessen

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Abstract

In 1809 a small band of men tried unsuccessfully to overthrow the French occupation forces in Marburg, a provincial university city in what is now the state of Hessen, in Germany. They were imprisoned, tried, and executed. Approximately 10 years later, a monument was erected in the city to honor their memory. Our project asked what role the memory played in the landscape of historical commemoration in the city. Building on what is now a vast literature on German history on the "history of memory," we asked what role this story and its commemoration play in the construction of local and national identity in the region. We did our research in Marburg in the state of Hessen in 2013. At the Hessen History Association we studied primary source documents, such as handwritten Fraktur, city records, and the papers of the regional and local historical Hessen society. We found that the memory of other historical developments played a more prominent role in historical consciousness and local identity of the city (such as the history of St. Elizabeth, the prominance of the University of the dukedom in the medieval and early modern period, and the accomplishments of the Brothers Grimm). Still, the memory of the uprising played a role in the historical landscape that framed local and national identity in Marburg. The monument, which appeared at the turn of the 19th century, was the first to honor those who died in the uprising. It was erected in 1875, the 75th anniversary of the uprising, by the Hessen History Association. We also used a comparative approach in our study, contrasting the memory of the uprising in Marburg with that of Kassel, the capital city of the Hessen state in which Marburg belonged. We used the changing political contexts to explain why the event had different public significance at different periods of times in these two cities.

Research Questions

1. How was this story remembered?
2. Which groups were involved in the commemoration?
3. Was the story of the Napoleonic wars in general a part of the local landscape of commemoration? If so, when and why did people focus on the Marburg Uprising (uprising) as part of that memory?
4. Why was there a different history of commemoration in Kassel, Marburg, and Ockershausen?

Primary Sources and Historical Documents

- Articles from the Oberhessische Zeitung
- Records from the Hessen History Association (Kassel and Marburg branches)
- Marburg city records

Research Process

The research was coupled with my study abroad semester in Marburg, Germany. It was done in Marburg at the state archive and Phillips' University library. At the Archive we studied primary source documents, such as records from the history association and public records from the city. At the University library we found microfilm copies of the Oberhessische Zeitung which was the primary newspaper in Marburg during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition to primary source document research at the archive and library, I studied the monuments to the uprising that were created to commemorate the event. This research project utilized my advanced German language skills.

Historical context

The Napoleonic Wars in Germany stretched from 1806 until Napoleon's final defeat in 1815. In 1809 Napoleon created the Kingdom of Westphalia which included the electorate of Hesse, the electorate of Hanover and the Duchy of Nassau. In 1809 Napoleon created the Kingdom of Westphalia which included the electorate of Hesse, the electorate of Hanover and the Duchy of Nassau. In 1813, the event was used to connect the local/regional identity of Hessen to the broader German National Identity.

Marburg

- The Uprising was relegated to a much smaller role in Marburg identity until 1904-1910.
- Generally only referred to by History professors and the History association except on major anniversaries.

Ockershausen

- The Uprising is important to Ockershausen as it is one of the few major events that happened in and around Ockershausen in its almost 800 years as a village.

Conclusions

The story was remembered as a regional “Hessisch” event and was commemorated with a plaque to Andreas Emmerich and a stone dedicated to those who lost their lives. The Hessen History Association led the commemoration and was supported by Hessen members of the German Military, such as General Hessen, and local Marburg dignitaries like the Mayor of Marburg at the time.

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