

The National Funeral of Victor Hugo

The day after he died (May 23), the National Assembly expressing unanimous veneration of Hugo the poet, voted to give him a grand national funeral, at state expense. Nothing close to consensus, however, existed regarding his political stances through the years, particularly regarding the Commune.

A thicket of divisive issues stirred public debate for the next ten days. When would the funeral take place? Where would the burial be? Père-Lachaise or the Panthéon? If the Panthéon, it would have to be desacralized, once more turned into a “temple of great men.” (this is what happened) What route would the cortege take? Who would be admitted to witness the rituals—at the *Arc de Triomphe*, along the procession route, and at the Panthéon? Would the big day occasion a rising of the *misérables* and revolutionaries? Under a red flag or a black flag? Would the police and their spies use the occasion to conduct thorough repression, firing on crowds and arresting dissidents? Each decision meant choosing one side or the other in the great socio-political divide of the era: siding either with the workers, the “*humbles*,” “*les petits*” or taking the side of the bourgeois, the rich and powerful.

The workers’ representatives wanted the funeral to be held on a Sunday, when everyone would have a day off, not a Monday, especially if Monday were not made a holiday. The government decided for Monday. Workers and their spokespersons wanted the procession to go through the popular quarters of the Right Bank (passing the symbolically charged Place de la République, for example) and burial in Père Lachaise, where anyone could enter without admission charge. Those in power decided on burial in the Panthéon, and they limited the procession’s route to the Left Bank.

The national funeral itself, on Monday June 1, was anticlimactic. Disorder did not break out. Everything went as planned: the ceremony at the *Arc de Triomphe*, the procession across the

bourgeois boulevards of the Left Bank, and the entry into the Pantheon. Authorities and the police successfully controlled the day's events —to the benefit of the state and placeholders on all levels of government who had choice seats. The police seized some red flags and black flags along the procession route and made a few arrests, but no great trouble erupted.

The authorities succeeded in appropriating Hugo's life and works for their purposes, making the funeral a ceremonial moment of national unity, nationalist pride in French culture, and homage to a hero of the Republic. They left out the Hugo who voiced the anger of "the people" and the defiant intellectual who was outlawed and exiled. Amidst the grandiose pageantry organized by the powerful, only the pauper's hearse he had insisted on stood as a testament to his commitment to the commoners, the luckless, the dominated.

Adapted from: <https://h-france.net/fffh/maybe-missed/victor-hugos-funeral-as-historical-fiction/>

Exercise

How and why did the Third Republic honour Victor Hugo?

Underline or highlight information in the text that helps to explain how the government paid homage to Victor in one colour and why it did this in a second colour.

Use your underlined/highlighted information to write a short paragraph response to the question.