

# THE EMPIRE IS BACK

TEXT: JEANNETTE GODDAR

The Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire are long gone – but in many European cities, they are still very much alive.

58 In Vienna, for example, remembrance of the times when the city was besieged by the Turks is fostered, while the tens of thousands of Viennese citizens of Turkish origin are ignored. At the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Goettingen, a team led by Jeremy F. Walton is studying the way in which former empires are treated today.

Visitors to Vienna are keen to tour the city in one of the many traditional and comfortable horse-drawn carriages that solicit customers all day long throughout the city center. The “Fiaker” (coach drivers), some of whom still address their passengers in old-fashioned parlance like “Gnae’ Frau” (“Ma’am”) and “die Herrschaften” (“sirs”), take their fares to the Stephansdom cathedral and the Hofburg former imperial residence, Schönbrunn and Belvedere palaces, and the Prater amuse-

ment park. To put it another way: in most cases, it is not the capital of Austria that people are shown in their first encounter with this city, but the hub of the Habsburg dynasty, which came to an end just over a hundred years ago. However, such city tours also take them past reminders – some of them more visible, some less – of the two sieges of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire. In 1529 and 1683, Ottoman troops stood on the outskirts of the capital of the Danube Monarchy. They were unsuccessful in their attempts to seize the city, but to this day, the story is firmly anchored in Austrian historiography. Even the most important church bell in the Stephansdom – which is something of a sacred national symbol for the Austrian people – was cast mostly from the metal of Ottoman cannons in 1711. In 1945, a fire caused the first bell to crash into the nave at the foot of the South Tower, coincidentally destroying the “Tuerkenbefreiungsdenkmal”, the monument commemorating the

liberation from the Turks. Today, the place is marked by a plaque, with the following inscription in Latin: “Once, Maria came to save us from suffering at the hands of the Turks. Proud stone figures expressed the gratitude of their city.”

There is more to this story: a number of buildings in Vienna are decorated with shimmering golden “Turkish cannonballs” that symbolize the Ottoman bombardment of the city. There are stone sculptures showing Ottoman horsemen, a park called “Tuerkenschanzpark” (Turkish entrenchment park), and of course, a plethora of monuments showing proud Habsburg victors. Even the roof design of the Belvedere Palace, the construction of which began in 1712, was inspired by the Ottoman tents that were once erected there. As Annika Kirbis explains: “Once you start looking for the traces of the ‘first and second Turkish siege’ as it is known here, it soon becomes clear



A resurrected hero:  
Ban Josip Jelačić,  
a Habsburg military  
commander, is now  
revered again in  
some parts of Croatia.  
During the Soccer  
World Cup in 2018, fans  
draped his statue  
in Zagreb with the  
colors of the Croatian  
coat of arms.



PHOTO: DREAMSTIME

that there are countless numbers of them! There are more than a hundred sites in Vienna alone that serve as a reminder of these events. And there are many, many more throughout the rest of Austria.” Kirbis, a social and cultural anthropologist from Germany, who is conducting her doctoral research at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Goettingen, initially moved to Vienna to work on her master’s thesis. Her original plan was to study the present-day experiences of Turkish immigrants to the city. However, initially every database and Internet search yielded only events that took place hundreds of years ago, even though between 200,000 and 300,000 people of Turkish origin have been living in Austria for decades. Many of them came as so-called “guest workers” or followed their families to the country, and hold Austrian citizenship by now.

## Grandchildren of the Ottomans

But what is it like for people whose roots lie in the former Ottoman Empire to be surrounded by all this symbolism? To find out, Annika Kirbis interviewed Viennese citizens with Turkish roots, often during walks around the city. Their responses to her questions varied widely. Some had remained unaware of all the monuments over the decades, while others felt insulted by the images of saber-wielding horsemen in harem pants. A few of them told her that visitors from Turkey like to visit the sites of decisive battles, and rather than seeing the campaigns as a failure, they felt a certain sense of pride that the Ottoman forces had advanced as far as Vienna. Others, who are labeled as being Turkish but who do not necessarily identify themselves as such –

Kurds, for example – noted wryly that “It was a good thing that the Viennese kicked them out.” The longer Kirbis studied the issue, the more fragmented people’s memories seemed to be. At the same time, one thing became clear: “History continues to be negotiated in debates about immigration, in speeches about integration, as well as in discriminatory remarks. Often, it is also due to the use of a kind of siege rhetoric, which everyone growing up in Vienna is familiar with.”

It’s also not hard to find tangible examples of conscious efforts to keep history alive. For example, in September 2020, to mark the anniversary of the victory of the Habsburgs, the right-wing populist FPÖ party invited citizens to a “liberation celebration”, which in the words of the deputy mayor of Vienna was intended “to demonstrate that we do not tolerate parallel Islamist societies (...)” On the other hand, in 2014, during a visit to Vienna just before the Turkish elections, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appealed to his supporters in the city, calling them all “grandchildren of Sultan Suleiman and Kara Mustafa,” the two men who had led the first and second Turkish sieges. As anthropologist Jeremy F. Walton explains, this emphasis on collective strength and the securing of political power in the service of a national narrative are “typical motivations for ‘re-imperializing’ history.” However, it would be inaccurate to generalize here. Religion and aesthetics also play a role, as does everyday culture. “Even in the fashion world, designers are drawing inspiration from empires that have long ceased to exist.” Walton is Head of the Max Planck Research Group, “Empires of Memory. The Cultural Politics of Historicity in Former Habsburg and Ottoman Cities”, in which Kirbis conducts her doctoral research.

It is striking that, like Annika Kirbis, Walton more or less stumbled into this area of research. Walton is a U.S. citizen who moved to Turkey around fifteen years ago to write his doctoral thesis on Muslim civil society. “At

60

The culture of remembrance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: people in Carinthia and South Tirol used to decorate their village fountains with these “Turk heads”. Today, these heads are displayed in the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art in Vienna.



PHOTO: ANNIKA KIRBIS/MPI FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY



Culture of remembrance in the year 1983: contrary to what the plaque suggests, this Viennese house was not destroyed by the Ottomans, but by the Viennese themselves. They set fire to the suburbs in order to rob the enemy of the opportunity to hide within them.

first, the Ottoman Empire was not on my radar. But everywhere I went, it was being re-negotiated and brought to people's attention. In some cases, smaller Islamic organizations were even paying for monuments to be renovated," he explains. To recap: at that time, Erdoğan, who has been posing as a post-modern sultan for several years now, had just entered office, and Turkey as a secular state was still far more focused on the founder of the Republic, Kemal Atatürk than it is today.

This is, in short, what led to the creation of the research group, which examines eight cities that once belonged to

the Habsburg Monarchy and/or the Ottoman Empire, and are now located in eight different countries. Walton loosely divides the cities into pairs. First, there are Vienna and Istanbul, the former centers of the empires, then Budapest and Sarajevo, which came under both Habsburg and Ottoman rule, and where the two empires still exert an influence over public life and political debate. Third, there are Thessaloniki and Trieste, which used to be important port cities, and which are both located in countries that certainly do not regard themselves as successors to the empire of which they were once part: Greece, where the expulsions of the Greek popula-

tion from Turkish soil in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have left deep scars, and Italy, which very consciously insists that the South Tirol and Trentino regions, along with the strips of land along the north-eastern Adriatic coast, are incontestably Italian territory. Walton himself has his research base in the former Habsburg city of Zagreb, now in Croatia, which forms the fourth pair, together with Belgrade, formerly a part of the Ottoman Empire and now in Serbia. "Observing how the recent socialist past is dealt with in these two cities as well as Sarajevo, in tandem with their imperial past, adds another fascinating layer to our research," he explains. The questions





that interest the interdisciplinary Research Group vary widely, as do the approaches and methods used to study monuments, urban planning, cultural artifacts, discussions and collective memories. What binds them together is “Empires of Memory”. The name is a reference to memory studies, an approach that has become established in recent decades among German Holocaust researchers in particular. Rather than viewing history through the prism of official documents, this research approach looks at how his-

torical events have become a part of people’s collective memory, and how they become incorporated into the overall narrative of a society as a result. To examine how the narrative of the sieges influences the memory of today’s migration society, Annika Kirbis combines memory research with approaches used in anthropology, as well as in literature and museum studies. One focus of her research is the Wien Museum, which houses the “History and City Life

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*JEREMY F. WALTON*



Divided memory: three years ago, the Wien Museum opened up a different perspective on Austrian history with an exhibition about the lives of “guest workers”, many of whom come from Turkey.

Collection”. “The collection on the Turkish Wars – or ‘Turkish spoils’ – formed the basis upon which the museum was founded,” she says. Today, the museum describes itself as an “urban universal museum.” Currently, it is closed for renovation. However, what Kirbis describes from the time prior to its closure is not exactly what you would call “universal”. She followed the “Migration Sammeln” (“Collecting Migration”) project, which was commissioned by the City of Vienna along with the Wien Museum, and which involved

the acquisition of items and photographs belonging to Viennese citizens of Turkish and Yugoslav origin, often with the support of migrant organizations. The collection was exhibited under the title “Moving History. Viyana – Beć – Vienna”. And then, Kirbis explains, “On the first floor of the museum there was an exhibition about migration, to the right of the staircase, while to the left, there was the permanent exhibition, large parts of which were dedicated to the Turkish siege.”

## A new context for old monuments

Annika Kirbis is interested in one particular question: “Is it possible to narrate history in this way?” Basically, she already gives the answer in the working title of her doctoral thesis: “Weltstadt without migrants? Transnational memories and post-imperial nostalgia in Vienna’s urban heritage”. Kirbis argues that the history of migration should not simply be understood as a “gap to be filled in the city’s memory”, but that collective memory needs to allow for different perspectives. “Many migrants feel that they do not really belong, that they are regarded as being different and are therefore excluded, despite being Austrian citizens. This is exacerbated by historical narratives that only reflect the perspective of the so-called majority society.” She points to a parallel issue that is debated in Germany: the way in which pupils are taught to remember the Holocaust in schools. “How should this topic be introduced to young people whose families had no ties to Germany previous to the Second World War? Even if it’s meant well, telling these pupils ‘your grandparents weren’t involved’ excludes them from the process, and prevents remembrance of the Holocaust from being kept alive in an immigration society.”

Similarly, the question arises as to how a narrative with a broader range of perspectives can be created about the siege of Vienna, for example. “First, it would be important to step back and take a critical look at the issue; to ask ourselves what memory this city is trying to preserve and whether it reflects today’s society,” she explains. As a next step, the existing monuments to the siege could be contextu-

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### SUMMARY

Empires like the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire are alive and well in the collective memory, and the myths surrounding them are often consciously cultivated.

In Vienna, there are a large number of monuments dedicated to the Turkish sieges of 1529 and 1683. They contribute to the preservation of the image of the ‘Turk’ as the enemy, and marginalize Turkish immigrants as a result.

Research into this area is just beginning to examine the influence that former great empires have on present-day societies. Researchers recommend taking a critical approach to a country’s imperial past.

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alized: “Why not also tell people about the period in which they were erected, and what collective perceptions were prevalent at the time?” This would entail questions as to how the sieges were differently commemorated in 1933, then later on in 1983 to mark the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the second siege. At the same time, this would create an opportunity to ask which images are still being uncriti-



cally reproduced today and which ones tend to be excluded from the collective memory. For example, it was the Ottomans who brought coffee to Vienna, which in turn led to the establishment of the famous Viennese coffee houses. Also, legend has it that the crescent-shaped “Vanillekipferl” cookie was inspired by the Islamic half-moon. As Kirbis says, “Most Viennese are aware of these influences. But to date, they have still not lessened the impact of all those images that convey the concept of ‘the Turk as the enemy’ to this day.” Overall, she concludes that simply adding a few new memories here and there is not enough: “Migration history demands that we question and rethink existing narratives such as the one relating to the siege.”

The challenge for the Research Group is not only describing which images and symbols are kept alive and thereby frequently adapted to suit the era in question. “Often, the most interesting aspect is what is not shown, since this reveals what is allowed to be shown and what must be kept hidden,” Jeremy F. Walton explains. However, this is where memory studies run into their biggest problem: things that have not been preserved cannot enter collective memory. “How can we find out what was suppressed in the past?” Walton asks. “Whenever this is not possible, we must at least be aware of the fact that there are gaps.” Steps have been taken to ensure that answers continue to be found to these questions, as well as others relating to the Habsburg Monarchy and the

Ottoman Empire. After the Research Group at the Max Planck Institute in Goettingen has completed its project, Walton plans to move to the University of Rijeka in Croatia to pursue a grant from the European Research Council. The name of the planned research group borrows from the word for one who has returned from the realm of the dead – or those who are thought to have died. “REVENANT: Revivals of Empire – Nostalgia, Amnesia, Tribulation”. The empire is back, at least as a revenant.



Glorification of the past: during the 1990s, the Turkish government arranged for the monstrous busts of the Ottoman sultan Suleiman (right) and his opponent, the commander Miklós Zrínyi, to be erected at the site of a historic battle in Szigetvár in Hungary.



PHOTO: JEREMY F. WALTON/MPI FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

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