

The nation's "timeless mission": Frontier Orientalism in Central European historical fiction

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The cultural identity of Central Europe has been shaped by the experience of being along the frontier between East and West, particularly the threat of invasion or occupation from the Ottoman Empire. After the definitive withdrawal of the Ottomans from the region at the end of the 18th century, this encounter continued to shape the national literatures in the genre of historical fiction. One of the best-known studies of the historical novel is by Georg Lukács, who sees it as a symptom of the decline of bourgeois society:

The appeal to national independence and national character is necessarily connected with a re-awakening of national history, with memories of the past, of past greatness, of moments of national dishonour, whether this results in a progressive or reactionary ideology. Thus in this mass experience of history the national element is linked on the one hand with problems of social transformation; and on the other, more and more people become aware of the connection between national and world history (1962, 25).

Despite his Hungarian background, Lukács hardly mentions Central European texts, yet Hungarian literature has a considerable tradition of historical fiction going back to the 1830s (Hajdu 2009). Writing in the 1980s, when Europe was still physically divided by the "Iron Curtain", Csaba Kiss relates the "intermediate and frontier character" of the region to "the widespread tradition among the peoples of the region that Europe's defensive bastion, the *antemurale*, stretched precisely through their lands [...] the sense of mission has been integrated into the national traditions articulated through literature. It can be found equally in the historical novels of the Pole Sienkiewicz, the Hungarian Gárdonyi or the Rumanian Sadoveanu" (1989, 129). While this "mission" of defending Europe gave these nations a sense of purpose, Kiss suggests that it also contributed to a sense of "uncertainty" in relation to modernity.

In contrast to Western imperialist Orientalism (Said 1978), the image of the Orient in Central Europe was not a justification for colonialism, but a means of preserving cultural identity. Drawing on the case of Austria (an imperial power, of course, but not one with colonies outside Europe), the anthropologist Andre Gingrich has proposed the concept of "frontier Orientalism" as "a relatively coherent set of metaphors and myths that reside in folk and public culture." The representation of the Oriental Muslim within Austrian art and folklore "places the home country and its population along an adjacent territorial and military borderline which is imbued

with a timeless mission.” However, Gingrich identifies contrasting images: the Turk is the “Bad Muslim” who attacked the homeland, while the Bosnian is the “Good Muslim” who helped to defend it: “Overcoming the Bad Muslim is a precondition to the glorious achievement not only of modernity but of identity, while relying on a controlled Good Muslim in the struggle against other threats is necessary to maintain it: this is the metanarrative of frontier orientalism” (1996, 119). As Andrew Wheatcroft has pointed out, “Frontier Orientalism was not the rigid and immovable structure which Said described as typical of British and French imperialism. It was much more adaptable” (2008, 259). Gingrich first presented his concept in Slovenia, and it was scholars there who began to extend it to Central European literature. Bojan Baskar has explained that references to the “Turkish war” are “inscribed in the landscape in Central Europe” and “provide a shared field of metaphorical reminders of the past, available to everyone as elements of local identity” (2010, 107–108). These elements were an attempt to strengthen the fragile multi-nationalism of the Austro-Hungarian Empire through shared hatred of a common enemy. Yet through its use in the genre of historical fiction, the Turkish image actually strengthened individual national identities and weakened Habsburg dominance.

Pinar Sadar has described the Turks in Slovenian historical novels, such as Josip Jurčič’s *Jurij Kozjak* (1864), as an anonymous menace lacking individual characteristics:

Despite their historical setting on the grounds of the Turkish wars, the main storyline of the Turkish story usually excludes direct connections to the Turkish protagonists [...] The Turks are liberated of any subjectivity and consequently presented in the form of an anonymous animalistic mass, incapable of performing any emotional act. Their highly objectified representation does not introduce them as a social group with its own culture but simply underpins their status of menace that is – in the fashion of natural disasters – destroying “the homeland” (113–114).

The historical menace posed by this “Other” is used to strengthen identification with a national identity. Etienne E. Charrière has identified “three main axes” of the reception of historical fiction among minority groups (especially Greek and Armenian) in the late Ottoman Empire:

First, novelists in narrow literary fields operated a drastic nationalization of the historical novel by turning it into a powerful vehicle for the consolidation of a greater sense of national community [...] Second, they transformed the [British and French] paradigm [...] which envisioned history as *difference* and historical progress as rupture – by emphasizing, on the contrary *sameness and continuity*. Third, with its special interest in novels depicting recent events, these same novelists liberated the genre from a conception of the past as necessarily distant (2016, 24–25).

Charrière concludes that these differences from the Western paradigm (as analyzed by Lukács) are due largely to the small nations’ “ongoing process of historical change [...] When history is still a promise and not yet an accomplishment, the limits between present and past become blurred and history is experienced through a different paradigm from the one at play in communities enjoying greater social and political stability” (34–35). This model also applies to the literatures of the Habsburg-Ot-

toman borderlands, particularly those of the countries now known as the Visegrád group (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech and Slovak Republics).

One source for Central European historical novelists was the genre of narratives by authors who had survived captivity in the Ottoman Empire, which emphasized the continuity of national experience by “blurring the limits between present and past” (Sabatos 2015; Charrière 2016). In the Slovak writer Janko Kalinčiak’s novella *Púť lásky* (The Pilgrimage of Love, 1850), the Turkish Aga Osman captures the maiden Žofia and her suitor Janko Černok. René Bílik has seen this story as hiding “the overlapping of the individual romantic feeling with the ‘task of the times’ (meaning here the task of destroying the foreign intruder) and the desire for personal revenge coming from it. Osman’s love for Žofia is an attempt to overcome this limitation as an expression of the human in the traditionally inhuman element of Slovak history – in the Turk-brute” (2008, 78). The contrast between the Central European and Turkish characters is complicated by the description of Aga Osman, which is surprisingly positive:

Osman was the youthful, high-spirited, courageous son of the Pasha Kapudan [Admiral], prepared since early youth for high deeds, for glory. And in his heart shone the stories of the old people, beautiful pictures of the Koran [...] Even so there was not a more handsome youth in the whole area. His face was not fully marked by the eastern features, whose hardness was mixed with youthful uncertainty, but also with delicacy (1975, 143–144).

Despite his courage and good looks, Aga Osman first kidnaps Žofia, who intends to marry Janko Černok. In the opening scene the men chase each other on horseback and then fight a duel: “The two young men in the first strength of their manhood, both of them with power and boldness [...] came together and struck at each other for a beloved maiden, before her eyes” (136). Žofia, first seen in Osman’s arms, is reclaimed by Černok, but on their wedding day, Osman reappears. This time he kidnaps Černok and takes him to Belgrade (closer to the center of Ottoman power).

Kalinčiak’s frontier Orientalism is further complicated by the addition of a female Balkan Muslim character, whose lack of self-control is contrasted with Osman’s ultimate self-sacrifice. Žofia disguises herself as a male troubadour and goes to Belgrade, pleading with the vizier Achmet’s daughter Elmira to free Černok. This improbable scene of a young Muslim woman meeting alone with a foreign male visitor leads to an example of mistaken gender when Elmira falls in love with the young singer. As she professes her impossible love, her impetuous Oriental nature is emphasized by the use of the word “intensity” (*prudkost* in the original, which can also mean “boldness” or “ferocity”) twice in the same sentence:

Elmira looked at the young singer, her eyes met his glance. In the intensity of the Eastern temperament, she joined the singer, grasped his hand, pressed it to her heart [...] as if the mysterious desire and the sadness of her mind were reflected in her, she cried out in intensity [...] “Although you are a slave, a servant, you do not need to sigh for eternity, for not even the sad night longs so much for her lover, the pale moon, as Elmira longs for you, and Elmira is the heart and soul of Achmet” (163–164).

Disappointed to discover Žofia’s true identity, Elmira hands her over to Aga Osman. However, when Žofia pleads for her freedom, Aga Osman releases both her

and Černok despite his own despair, telling her: “You will pity Osman, for all longing, all faith, all hope has left his heart” (170). Yet this self-sacrifice is in vain; on Černok’s return to his homeland from captivity (still dressed in Ottoman clothing), he is mistaken for Osman and killed, and Žofia dies from grief. At the end of the story, Žofia’s father and Aga Osman visit the grave of the lovers, and the final sentence reveals the narrator’s sympathy for the heroic antagonist: “You will feel sorry for the perished, passionate lovers; I feel sorry for Osman” (177). Thus the Turk is not a uniformly cruel stereotype, but a distinction is drawn based on gender, between the almost chivalrous Aga Osman and the impetuous and vengeful Elmira.

The Central European historical novelist *par excellence* was the Nobel laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz, best known for his Roman epic *Quo Vadis* (1896, Eng. trans. 1897) but also the author of a famous trilogy first published in the 1880s. Both Sienkiewicz’s novels and their later film adaptations, as Elżbieta Ostrowska has noted, use a distinctly gendered form of Orientalism to strengthen Polish national identity:

In these texts, Otherness is crucially embodied in the figures of men representing the east [...] the images of the Other, as represented by the figures of Cossacks and Tatars, construct a vernacular fantasy of the Orient that problematizes the Saidian binary model [...] In Sienkiewicz’s narratives the orientalist discourse reveals self-doubt and uncertainty concerning the hegemonic variant of Polish (masculine) identity (2011, 507).

The final book of the trilogy, *Pan Wołodyjowski* (Colonel Wolodyjowski, 1888, Eng. translations *Pan Michael*, 1893, and *Fire in the Steppe*, 1992) is set against the backdrop of Poland’s struggles with the Ottoman Empire in today’s Ukraine. The exotic counterpart to the novel’s Polish protagonist Michal Wolodyjowski is the Tatar Asja (Azya in the English translation), the son of the powerful Tugai Bey, who had been captured by the Poles as a child but later freed. After Asja falls in love with the novel’s heroine (Wolodyjowski’s eventual wife) Basia, she manages to fight off his attempted rape and returns to the Polish camp. However, he takes his vengeance on the innocent Zosia Boski, who becomes his sexual slave and whom he sells to a merchant from Istanbul to live in a harem. These four characters (Wolodyjowski, Basia, Asja and Zosia) represent the gendered aspect of frontier Orientalism as described by Andre Gingrich:

The mytho-logic of “frontier orientalism” hence functions with the central mythological arrangement of being threatened or besieged on a nearby, contested, and fluctuating border through which an almost equally matched, dangerous, and therefore “evil” Oriental invades and existentially threatens “us” as well as our women (2015, 62–63).

Early in the novel, a middle-aged former captive named Pan Mushalski recounts his experiences in the Crimea and Istanbul:

There are no other ranks with them but lords and slaves, and there is nothing more grievous than Pagan captivity. God knows whether it is true, but I heard in the galleys that the waters in Tsargrad, such as the Bosphorus, and the Golden Horn too, which enters the heart of the city, have come from tears shed by captives. Not a few of mine were shed there (1893, 189).

Nonetheless, Poland's position on the frontiers of the Ottoman Empire gives it the important role of Europe's defensive bastion, as Mushalski proudly asserts: "The Turks themselves say that were it not for Lehistan, – thus they name our mother, – they would have been lords of the earth long ago. 'Behind the shoulders of the Pole,' say they, 'the rest of the world live in injustice; for the Pole,' say they, 'lies like a dog in front of the cross, and bites our hands'" (189). In Sienkiewicz's time, of course, a free Poland had ceased to exist for over a century, yet the *kresy* (Eastern Borderlands) were considered a key part of a future Polish state. Rather surprisingly, his imagined Eastern frontier was inspired by his travels along an entirely different frontier:

the magnificent descriptions of the wild 17th century borderlands of southeastern Poland are closely patterned on the American West [...] The writer had never visited those long-lost Wild Lands and Ukrainian Steppes that he recreates so brilliantly [...] But he saw the American plains and the western prairies, heard all the tales told around the campfires, admired the Indians, and literally fell in love with the untrammelled land and its vibrant people (Maciuszko 1991, 56).

The ease with which one frontier could be transposed on another shows the mythical power of frontier Orientalism in the Polish context, where the Tatars and the Turks (as well as the Russians) could be seen as "barbarians" that needed to be subdued by a more civilized culture, in a Central European parallel to the American national myth of "manifest destiny".

After Basia escapes from his attack, the Tatar leader Asja thinks obsessively of her body in terms that parallel the conquest of foreign territory:

But he loved that woman beyond measure and thought; he wanted her in his tent, to look at her, to beat her, to kiss her. If it were in his choice to be Padishah and rule half the world, or to take her in his arms, feel with his heart the warmth of her blood, the breath of her face, her lips with his lips, he would prefer her to Tsargrad, to the Bosphorus, to the title of Khalif (395).

After taking the meek Zosia as an unwanted substitute, Asja mercilessly abuses her, finally disposing of her when the threat of a new battle makes it inconvenient to keep captives:

Those of the soldiers who had no place to which they might send captives, and from love did not wish to sell them to strangers, preferred to kill them. Merchants of the caravan-serai bought others by the thousand, to sell them afterward in the markets of Stambul and all the places of nearer Asia. A great fair, as it were, lasted for three days. Azya offered Zosia for sale without hesitation; an old Stambul merchant, a rich person, bought her for his son [...] Her new owner loved her, and after a few months he raised her to the dignity of wife. Her mother did not part from her. Many people, among them many women, even after a long time of captivity, returned to their country. [...] Zosia never saw her native land, nor the faces of those who were dear to her. She lived till her death in a harem (398–399).

While the relative kindness of the Ottomans in distant Istanbul is contrasted with the brutal behavior of the Tatars on the imperial borders, Zosia Boski is already "dead" to her compatriots. As made clear in a letter from a Polish nobleman who has learned of her fate, she is deprived of any possibility of full reintegration into Polish

society (especially marriage and motherhood) after her innocence has been violated by the Oriental male. The inability to protect Zosia symbolizes the limits of Poland's ability to defend its frontiers from Eastern invaders, thus foreshadowing the century and a half of Russian (as well as Prussian and Austrian) domination.

Géza Gárdonyi's *Egri csillagok* (The Stars of Eger, 1901, Eng. trans. *The Eclipse of the Crescent Moon*, 2005), fictionalizes the 1552 siege of Eger, in which Hungarian forces led by István Dobó resisted an Ottoman attack. The novel, whose protagonist is the historical figure of Gergely Bornemissza, remains one of the most popular works of Hungarian literature. Gárdonyi described Istanbul on the basis of his own travel to Turkey, even reproducing a song he had heard and transcribed. As the translator George Cushing has noted: "Gárdonyi's greatest achievement is to weave history with fiction so convincingly that generations of readers have come to regard his story as factual, as indeed much of it is" (Gárdonyi 2005, xv). Taking place over a period of twenty years, the narrative is divided into five parts, and each of them features an episode of Ottoman captivity. Part One begins in 1533, when Gergely and his friend Éva Cecey (a fictional character) are captured as young children by a one-eyed Turk named Jumurdzsák, who plans to sell them as slaves. They manage to escape, Gergely (who has also inadvertently stolen Jumurdzsák's lucky talisman) becomes a hero, and he is adopted by the aristocrat Bálint Török. After the Hungarians capture Jumurdzsák, he reveals that his mother was Hungarian; he had been seized as a small boy and became a renegade. Part Two, set in 1541, depicts the fall of Buda, when Török is taken captive by the Sultan. Gergely, now a young man, watches the Ottoman forces marching into Hungary to occupy Buda, but he is caught and briefly held in captivity for the second time. In Part Three, Gergely and Éva travel to Istanbul, in an unsuccessful attempt to free Török. Part Four and Five move ahead to 1552, when the Ottomans attack Eger. Now married to Éva, Gergely joins the fight, leaving her at home with their little son, who is kidnapped by Jumurdzsák. The citadel of Eger withstands the Turkish forces, giving the Hungarians a temporary but symbolic victory, and Gergely and Éva's son is freed in exchange for a young Turkish captive, reuniting the central family unit as well.

At the beginning of the novel, Jumurdzsák tries to tempt young Gergely out of hiding by offering him figs, in an allusion to Eve and the serpent. As Ágnes Györke suggests: "The snake intruding into a fragile Paradise becomes the metaphor of Turkish invasion [...] The snakelike Other, after shattering the Paradise of the children, becomes transformed into the Other threatening the Hungarian nation" (2005, 132–134). Just as they hold back the Ottomans at the walls of Eger, the Hungarians must also withstand the temptation to become renegades to their faith. *The Stars of Eger* reveals the ambiguous role of Ottoman culture for Hungarians: as part of their national past, but at the same time, distant enough to be fictionalized with exotic stereotypes. As Ildikó Beller-Hann has stated, 19th-century Hungarian Orientalism "served as a background against which a heroic past could be created that would strengthen the ideology behind Hungarian nationalism, but it also served as a displaced metaphor for the desire to gain some degree of independence from Austria" (1995, 226). In Part Two, Gergely dreams of a meeting between Bálint Török and

Miklós Zrínyi, who would become a national hero for both the Hungarians and Croats for his fight against the Turks at the siege of Sziget in 1566:

[Zrínyi:] “A sacred oath, gentlemen, that we’ll devote all the thoughts of our life to the resurrection of our country. That we’ll not sleep on soft beds as long as the Turk can call a single foot of the soil of Hungary his own!” [...]

[Török:] “Are twenty-four thousand Hungarians to die again just for the Austrians to lord it over us? Devil take them! A hundred times rather the honest pagan than the deceitful Austrian puffed up with lies!” (Gárdonyi 2005, 115)

The resentment of Hungarians toward the Austrians at the beginning of the twentieth century is echoed in the speech of his characters from 350 years earlier. Zrínyi’s brief appearance also offers an intertextual reference to an earlier Hungarian literary classic, *Szigeti veszedelem* (The Peril of Sziget, 1651) by Zrínyi’s great-grandson, also named Miklós Zrínyi.

As the Turks approach Eger, the commander István Dobó exhorts his troops to stand against them, despite their overwhelming numbers: “I know the Turkish army [... It] is not a mass of soldiers but an assortment of riff-raff [...] however few the Hungarians are in number, they can confuse and conquer the Turks if alongside their bravery they take intelligence with them as a shield.” His captain Pető continues with the reminder that two other fortresses, Temesvár and Szolnok, have recently fallen to the Turks:

They fell because Temesvár was defended by Spanish mercenaries, Szolnok by Spaniards, Czechs, and Germans. And now I’ll tell you what I believe in. In the fact that Eger is not defended by Spaniards, Czechs, or Germans. Here [...] everyone is Hungarian, and most of them are from Eger. Lions defending their own den! I trust in Hungarian blood! (335–336)

In this view, the mix of nationalities weakens empires rather than strengthening them, and one can only trust one’s own people. This message is echoed during the siege itself, when the attackers call out to the defending Hungarians in a variety of languages:

Until now only cries of “Allah!” and mocking comments had been heard from the Turkish camp, but this time there were shouts on all sides in Hungarian: “Give yourselves up! If you don’t, you’ll come to a horrible end!”

It was the Turkish troops who knew Hungarian shouting from the enemy camp. But they also shouted in Slovak, German, Spanish and Italian. The defenders, however, made no reply in either Hungarian, Slovak, German, Spanish or Italian (443–444).

Despite his use of multilingual elements (including Turkish), Gárdonyi does not look favorably on multiculturalism, reflecting Hungary’s uneasy status between the Habsburg monarchy and the increasingly vocal minorities (including the Slovaks) in the 19th century. While the identification of the Turks with Islam overshadowed attempts at a more sympathetic approach, it was increasingly clear that the true enemy of national freedom was Habsburg rule.

After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when the establishment of Czechoslovakia brought the Czechs and Slovaks together in a single state, Czech historical

fiction invoked the Ottoman invasions as part of the effort to strengthen the national identity of the multinational republic. Jaroslav Durych's *Bloudění* (Wandering, 1929, Eng. trans. *The Descent of the Idol*, 1936), which portrays the period following the Czech defeat at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, uses historical enemies to create a heroic tradition. However, the socialist-era critic Blahoslav Dokoupil claimed that Durych's "generally overrated" novel had "opposed the whole existing development of our historical prose with its progressive tradition" (1987, 47). In particular, the conservative Durych emphasizes the role of the Catholic Church in defending the Czech nation; according to Dokoupil, his allegorical use of historical conflict "captures the dawn of the future triumph of the Catholic Church on the horizon of the Thirty Years' War" (48).

A typical image of the Ottoman invaders can be seen in Durych's description of a siege in Moravia: "From the towers one could see the burning villages. News came [...] that thousands of women and children had been carried away into Turkish slavery. But that was not the worst" (116). The battlefield scene portrays "pagan hordes" with their fearsome beards and turbans:

They stood their ground and then the Turks arrived [...] and the Sirdar himself sat on his charger, stiffening his feet in their lace-lined sandals against the broad gilt stirrups, and his turban scared the crows in the mist [...] Then the Turks gave a yell and renewed shouting arose on every side [...] The [Austrian] musketeers stood firm [...] The cowardly heathen yelling called up Death and Famine from the grey, plague-infested distances [...] All the heathens from Turkey and Transylvania glistened with dog fat from their teeth and their moustaches down to their boots (119–122).

The references to "cowardly heathen" evoke the Baroque-era fear and hatred of the Turk, who represents Death, bringing famine and plague. At the same time, the description of the Sirdar's "lace-lined sandals" is exotic and vaguely effeminate.

One of Durych's protagonists, the lieutenant Kajetán, is caught on a reconnaissance mission and becomes a captive of the Ottoman-allied Transylvanian forces: "They made a stop somewhere and set him down. He saw a lot of horses, and then a horse's head and behind it a huge bearded face, as monstrous as if the Sultan of the heathen himself, who devours live snakes and Christian virgins, had crawled out of his den" (1936, 126). By evoking the Turkish Sultan as the "monstrous" enemy of Europe, Durych is not only recreating the past, he is mythologizing it. After a month in captivity, Kajetán "thought of his former officers who, even in agonies of pain, were strong, like beasts of prey; it seemed to him that captivity makes men cowardly" (133). He eventually escapes and returns to Bohemia, displaying the ability of the Czechs to triumph over their adversaries, even demonic ones. However, Durych's glorification of the Catholicization of Bohemia, which was closely tied to almost three centuries of Habsburg domination, was rejected by contemporary critics such as F. X. Šalda as a false direction for historical fiction, trapped in its closed vision of the past (Dokoupil 1987, 49).

In the new conditions of the Czechoslovak Republic, both Czech and Slovak writers were free of the overwhelming burden of preserving national identity and were able to develop a higher aesthetic standard even in popular genres like histor-

ical fiction. The use of historical themes had been less common in Slovak literature during the period of the national revivals, as Vladimír Forst has noted: “The Slovak national revival could not rely upon the reality of a historical Slovak state as the Czech national revival had done” (1968, 502). Yet while historical themes declined in popularity among Czech writers after 1918, historical fiction became newly important in Slovak literature. While conditions were much better for Slovak writers in Czechoslovakia than they had been under Hungarian rule, the national question had not been resolved for them, as it had apparently been for the Czechs, but had taken on a different form.

One of the factors shaping the use of historical themes in the interwar period was the important issue of attracting a Slovak readership. As Ivan Sulík has explained: “If a Slovak writer wanted to keep the approval of a wide readership, he had to choose a path of consensus building on the tradition established by older types of popular literature. Thus prose writers made use of the common reader’s natural fondness for historical tales from the Hungarian past” (1978, 356). During the wartime Slovak State (1939–1945) and under the Communist regime (beginning in 1948), a historical setting also provided a form of escapism for both authors and readers. In his analysis of Slovak historical prose, René Bilík has identified “ambivalence” in the development of this genre between “glorifying-mythical” and “skeptical-ironic” lines, and the simultaneous adherence in texts from the 1940s and early 1950s to both of these viewpoints:

This shows above all the specificity of the socio-political situation in which the Slovak literature finds itself, and in which the undoubtedly aesthetic theme of the historical past obtains the function of **allegorical** narrative, at the same time also preserving its receptive independence from non-literary circumstances (the possibility of reading these texts without literary-historical support) (2008, 146, emphasis in original).

Jozef Horák’s novel *Sebechlebskí hudci* (The Sebechleby Musicians, 1946) turns the theme of Ottoman captivity into a rather lighthearted adventure, although it was written during the traumatic period of World War II, and enjoyed immediate popularity, being reprinted several times in the following decades. Ján Poliak’s afterword to the second edition (1954) provides an explicit political interpretation for the reader of the early socialist period: “The feudal lords [...] truly did little to defend the empire. On the battlefield, the ones who bled the most were the subordinate people, who did not want to exchange one cruel lord for an even crueler one” (Horák 1980, 265). The past serves the present by evoking mythical enemies to strengthen the nation against its enemies: the former bourgeois elite and the capitalist foreign powers.

Horák’s *Sebechleby Musicians* begins in 1594, as the Turks are threatening present-day Slovakia: “They took and looted, and if someone didn’t like it, the Turkish sword convinced them [...] bloody traces were left behind: murdered people, burning houses, weeping, lamenting, tears” (8). The musicians Peter and Jakub had been captured by the Turks as children. Jakub is sent to guard the powerful Lord Dóci’s wife Lady Apolónia on a journey, but the group is attacked by Turks, and Apolónia is captured along with her maid Katka. Jakub and Peter ask Lord Dóci’s permission to search for the women, and they request the help of “Baťa” (Uncle) Klimo, an older

man who had traveled in the Ottoman lands. As they approach the Danube, Peter asks him: “You weren’t afraid of executioners, and an executioner is worse than a Turk. Right?” Klimo replies: “How can an executioner be worse than a Turk? Is there any creature on earth worse than a Turk?” (94) The two main Turkish characters in the novel, however, are more comical than fearsome. Ismail, a military leader, is known as “Half-Whiskered” (Polfúzatý) because part of his mustache has been cut off, while Hussein Pasha of Buda, Lady Apolónia’s captor, is described as “so ringed with fat that he could hardly move” (158). Although he is briefly held captive by “Half-Whiskered”, Klimo easily convinces him that he can find a miracle cure for his missing facial hair, and is released. The three Slovaks then escape down the Danube and meet Hussein Pasha, who is preparing to leave for Istanbul and takes the musicians on board his boat as entertainment. Despite his ill temper, the pasha develops a liking for Klimo and allows him to stay in his palace, where he is eventually able to lead Lady Apolónia and Katka back to freedom. While the comical aspect of this adventure displays what Bilík calls the “skeptical-ironic” line of historical fiction, the triumph of the Slovak travelers over their more powerful enemies shows the “glorifying-mythical” approach, allegorizing the Slovak nation’s escape from the “captivity” of a more ruthless enemy: Nazi Germany.

Historical fiction has always been an ideal source for cinema, and the novels of Gárdonyi, Sienkiewicz, and Horák were all successfully adapted to film in the 1960s and 1970s. Zoltán Várkonyi’s *Stars of Eger* (1968) was a big-budget epic by Hungarian standards, with extensive battle scenes depicting the siege. A year later, the Polish director Jerzy Hoffman released his film based on Sienkiewicz’s *Colonel Wolodyjowski* (1969); ultimately he directed all three films from the trilogy in reverse chronological order, with the other parts following in 1974 and 1999. Horák’s *Sebechleby Musicians* is best known today for Jozef Zachar’s 1975 film adaptation, whose Istanbul scenes feature the exotic sights of snake charmers and veiled women. During the Communist period, the invasions of Central Europe again served as a “displaced metaphor”, and historical themes were used as a way of defining national identity against political repression.

From the growth of the national revival movements to the Nazi and Communist regimes, Central Europe’s “timeless mission” of defending Europe’s frontiers against the barbaric East evolved into the metaphorical longing for independence from foreign powers. However, as Andre Gingrich explains: “The symbols and registers of frontier orientalism may serve important – and virulent – local, regional, and global purposes [...] Regionally, these symbols, narratives and repertoires play a role in wider contests about migration and foreign relations” (1996, 123–124). While the post-communist period has opened Central Europe to multiculturalism and globalization, this statement is even more relevant twenty years after the essay’s first publication. The current migration crisis, in which Central European politicians have drawn upon the fear of Muslims to manipulate both their own citizens and the West, illustrates how the experience with the Ottoman Empire, kept alive partly through the genre of historical fiction, has a continuing impact on concepts of national and European identity.

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The nation's "timeless mission": Frontier Orientalism in Central European historical fiction

Frontier Orientalism. Historical fiction. Central European identity. Turks in literature. Imagology.

Andre Gingrich's concept of frontier Orientalism focuses on the former Habsburg Empire, which has been overlooked by Orientalist and postcolonial studies. Through a comparison of Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, and Czech novelists, including Janko Kalinčiak, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Géza Gárdonyi, Jaroslav Durych, and Jozef Horák, this study shows how the genre of historical fiction evoked what Gingrich calls Central Europe's "timeless mission" of defending the frontiers of the West from Eastern barbarians, as a metaphor for the repression of minority identities.

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