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The Turk as a Threat and Europe's "Other"

For most Europeans the words Turk and Turkey have negative connotations. A fear of Turks was impressed on western minds during the long period when the Turks governed a large part of Europe and seemed to threaten the existence of Christianity. The comment made in the autumn of 2004 by the then EU Commissioner, Bolkestein, in the discussion about whether or not Turkey should be given a negotiation date shows the persistence of this threat scenario. In the case of a yes, he warned, the victory over the Turks outside the gates of Vienna in 1683 would have been in vain. Instead, we would see the Turks rioting inside the gates of Brussels.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 aroused a fear of Turks that was later augmented and was symbolized by names of battlefields and conquered and besieged cities such as Mohács, Peterwardein, Vienna and Belgrade.

The Archbishop of Prague, for example, ordered that the city's church bells should toll at nine o'clock every Friday to remind people of the Turks' painful victory over the Christians. After the Turks had been driven out from Vienna in 1683, the bells would toll instead as a mark of thanksgiving that the danger of the Turks was over and, in this way, the threat was kept permanently alive in people's consciousness.

As early as the mid-1400s, special "missa contra turcas" were celebrated with the message that a victory over the Turks was only possible with the help of God. The Christian community was therefore necessary to withstand the cruelty of the Turks: "There are no crueller and more audacious villains under the heavens than the Turks who spare no age or sex and mercilessly cut down young and old alike and pluck unripe fruit from the wombs of mothers" claimed Bishop Fabri of Vienna (1536-41). Through preachings about the Turks, bad conditions in the European societies were also attacked which were said to favor the evil Turks. This applied in particular to alcohol abuse. To quote Bishop Fabri again: "How can a person who, due to drunkenness cannot stand on his feet, fight the sober Turk?"

In the 16th century, about 2,500 publications about the Turks, over a thousand of which were in German, were spread around Europe and in these, too, the image of the blood-thirsty Turk was imprinted. In the period of 1480-1610, twice as many books were published about the Turkish threat as about the discovery of the continent of America. Claims were spread that the Turks were the descendants of the son, Ismael, whom Abraham had with his Egyptian slave Hagar. In the first book of Moses 16:12, it says: "He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him. And he will live to the east of all his brothers."

Just about all the vices in the world were associated with the Turks. In Italy phrases such as "bestemmia come un Turco" (he swears like a Turk) and "puzza come un Turco" (he stinks like a Turk) were used. The French called rude behavior, cruelty and greed "turquerie" and when the Spanish wanted to make disparaging remarks about a person, he/she was called "turco". The English expression "to talk turkey to somebody" means to give a frank opinion to the opposite party.

The German repertoire ranged from "Türkenhund" (Turkish dog) to "Türkenknecht" (Turkish farm-hand), "Kümmeltürke" (caraway Turk) and "er qualmt wie ein Türke" (he smokes like a Turk). Both the pipe and tobacco came from the Turks. In the Austrian countryside you can still hear today how children are called in from play: "Es ist schon dunkel. Türken kommen. Türken kommen" (It's already dark. The Turks are coming. The Turks are coming).

Luther's closest associate, Philip Melancton, claimed that the Turks were red Jews. Jews because they circumcised their sons and had taken over other Jewish manners and customs. Red because they were bloodhounds that murdered and warred. According to other theologians, the word Turk came from "torquere", torture, and according to another popular theory the Turks were identical with the Scythians who were considered a particularly cruel race. Military power and cruelty were recurring attributes in all these claims about the origin of the Turks.

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had sent the Turks to punish the Christians in the same way as he had sent war, plagues and earthquakes. The reply of Pope Leo X was the famous papal bull in which he threatened Luther with excommunication and attempted to portray Luther as a troublemaker who advocated capitulation to the Turks.

However, in time Luther developed his own grounds for war against the Turks. The Christians could make war against the Turks but must first do penance and reform their lives and their church. Since the Turks were God's punishment, the Christians must first eradicate the grounds for this punishment. With that done, they could start a war of defence, which would then be justified: "This struggle must begin with penance and we must change our lives or we will fight in vain."

In Sweden too, the Turks were designated the arch-enemy of Christianity. This was the case, for example, in a book entitled *Luna Turcica eller Turkeske måne, anwissjandes lika som uti en spegel det mahometiske vanskelige regementet, fördeltes uti fyra kvarter eller böcker* (Turkish moon showing as in a mirror the dangerous Mohammedan rule, divided into four quarters or books) which was published in 1694 and was written by the parish priest of Jönköping, Erland Dryselius. In the sermons, the country's clergy preached about the Turks' general cruelty and blood-thirstiness and of how they systematically burned and plundered the areas they conquered. In a Swedish school book, published in 1795, Islam was described as "the false religion that had been fabricated by the great deceiver Muhammed, to which the Turks to this day universally confess".

Stories of the dog-Turk also contributed to this negative image. The dog-Turk was claimed to be a man-eating being, half animal and half human, with a dog's head and tail. Karl XII had got into its debt during his stay in Bender in the Ottoman empire and to settle his debt he had to pay a certain amount of human flesh every year. This debt was said to have been taken over by the freemasons who were also considered a threat to the church.

After the defeat of the Turks outside Vienna in 1683, the image of the dog-Turk began to change. He was no longer as dangerous but changed into a ridiculous figure. In carnival processions and masquerades from Bohemia to the Tyrol, from Vienna to the Rhineland, the dog-Turk appeared alongside witches, clowns and other popular comic figures. The Turks were generally ridiculed and the noble European character emphasized. This did not change the image of the brutal Turk but fear of this barbarian lessened and a feeling of superiority emerged that has lasted to the present day.

When the Turkish threat appeared to be over, a veritable Turkish fashion broke out in Europe's theatres and operas. The contents of play were drawn from fantasy and historical half-truths and the picture of the Turk was often

ambivalent and served to cement the image of both the dangerous and the ridiculous Turk. In the plays of Racine and Moliere you could see a funny figure with a turban and fat belly and it was good form to say a few words in Turkish too. In Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*, Osmin expresses his views on how Christians should be treated:

"Erst geköpft, dann gehangen, dann gespiesst von heissen Stangen, dann verbrannt, dann gebunden, dann getaucht, zuletzt geschunden" First beheaded, then hanged, then impaled on red-hot spikes, then burned, then bound and drowned, finally flayed."

In the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire began to establish permanent diplomatic missions in London, Paris, Vienna and Berlin. As a result of these contacts, all things Turkish became exotic, not least the dress fashion, "turquoise". Sultans and pashas were often portrayed as noble and enlightened people in contrast to European rulers. At the Prussian and Saxon courts, feasts, processions and weddings were held *à la Turc* and Turkish manners became a way for the upper classes to distance themselves from common people. Turkish kiosks were erected in Swedish manorial parks too and Gustav III built a Turkish pavilion at Haga Park.

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In the 18th century, Ignatius Mouradgea, a translator (dragoman) of Armenian origin at the Swedish Embassy in Istanbul, contributed to spreading knowledge and a positive image of Turkey in Europe through his encyclopedic volume entitled *Tableau Général de l'Empire Ottoman*. He was later knighted by Gustav III, acquiring the name d'Ohsson and was for a time head of the Embassy in Istanbul.

Turkish Janissary music inspired Mozart and Schubert, among others, to compose music *à la turca*. And with the age of enlightenment and Romanticism, there was increased interest in the exotic and greater tolerance of and curiosity about other religions and cultures, reflected in the image of the Turk who now came to be regarded in many quarters as the "noble savage".

Voltaire, however, did not hide his hatred of the Turks whom he characterized as "tyrants of the women and enemies of arts". These "barbarian usurpers" must be chased out of Europe. He accused them of having destroyed our ancient heritage from "the Orient's Christian realm" and wrote:

"I wish fervently that the Turkish barbarians be chased away immediately out of the country of Xenophon, Socrates, Plato, Sophocles and Euripides.

If we wanted, it could be done soon but seven crusades of superstition have been undertaken and a crusade of honor will never take place. We know almost no city built by them; they let decay the most beautiful establishments of Antiquity, they reign over ruins."

There are countless similar quotations from publications from other 18th century writers. The Turks were perceived as usurpers of the classical heritage that Europe's identity was said to be built on while they themselves were not considered to have a culture worth the name.

The image of Turkish women was also negative. They were described as uneducated, blindly submissive to the will of their parents and husbands. They had to hide their faces and were forced into arranged marriages, subjected to domestic violence and had no control over their own fate whatsoever.

However, there is one exception in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Letters from Turkey*. In 1716, she accompanied her husband after his appointment as British Ambassador in Istanbul.

She describes how Turkish women expressed their pity at the corset she was wearing when she visited the baths. It must be a male invention: "They thought I had been locked into this machine and was not capable of opening it myself, something which they attributed to my husband."

Never before had she met such beautiful, gifted and satisfied women as there. It was a completely wrong idea that Turkish women lived their days in imprisonment. Turkish women were undoubtedly Europe's most liberated. The veil was not a means of suppressing women. Quite the reverse. They could move freely on the streets without needing to fear harassment thanks to the veil and even evade their husbands' control. Turkish women could move freely and go wherever they wanted in the street. If they were bored in their harem, they could meet their women friends at the baths.

Her conclusion was that Turkish men and women were not at all as described in the travel books she had read. The Turks were no crueller than other people. According to Lady Montagu, the Hungarian prince at Győr treated his subjects far worse than the Turkish Sultan after conquering these areas. The Turks were a cultivated people who attached great importance to literature and architecture. They were far in advance of Europe in medicine, too. Smallpox which sorely plagued the English had been eradicated in Turkey through vaccination.

In the 1850s, Czar Alexander of Russia talked of Turkey as the sick man of Europe, an expression that stuck in public consciousness and gave the impression that the Ottoman Empire had always suffered under the reign of hopeless, cruel, dissolute and incompetent sultans. A negative image of the Turks and the Ottoman Empire now evolved in Europe, an image that was

largely based on prejudice, contempt and fear. In a geography book (*Elements of Geography*), published in London in 1833, the following, for example, may be read: "The Turks are generally tall, strong and robust. They are an idle, cruel and ignorant people. They like to smoke."

Another geography book (*Géographie Universelle*) published in Paris in 1860 gives this picture:

"The indolent Turk does not know about the excitement of our societies, he rests softly on the pillows of his sofa, smokes tobacco from Syria, warms up with Mocha coffee, watches dancing slaves; some grains of opium transport him to heavens accompanied by immortal beauties."

The image of the brutal Turks was further impressed by the fight for independence waged by the Christian peoples in the Balkans during the 19th century and which gave rise to the so-called "Eastern question". Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian nationalists attacked Muslim villages in the hope that this would trigger counter-measures on such a scale and of such brutality that the western powers would be induced to intervene on the side of the Christians. Lord Byron's death in Greece in fever in 1823, shortly after he had joined the Greek forces, set off a wave of anti-Turkish feeling all over Europe. In spite of the fact that outrages were committed on both sides – the Greeks started their war of independence in 1821 by massacring thousands of Turkish men, women and children at Morea – the western public opinion only reacted to Muslim outrages. The Muslims on the Balkans were regarded by their neighbors as *turci* and hence as traitors who had chosen to throw in their lot with the conquerors. Ethnic cleansing of predominantly Muslim areas was carried out by the Serbs as early as the first decades of the 19th century when the Turks were pushed back. On an old copperplate from Belgrade, you can see countless minarets. The mosques were leveled to the ground when the Turkish troops left the country.

When, in 1876, Ottoman troops put down a Bulgarian revolt with great brutality and massacred 15, 000 men, women and children, the event was used in British domestic politics. William Gladstone wrote a lampoon directed against his rival Benjamin Disraeli – *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* – 200, 000 copies of which were sold in two months and cemented the image of the brutal Turk.

The Turks were portrayed as a foreign body that must be driven out of Europe. The American writer, William Milligan Sloane, wrote, for example, after a journey through the European parts of the Ottoman Empire in 1908:

"From Asia they came, to Asia they return with little regret and being a totally unhistoric people it is doubtful whether centuries of European abode would in their future tradition be much more than a tale of Scheherazade. In

order to understand and do justice to the Turk we need a fourth dimension. He is our antipode."

The rhetoric increased during the First World War. The British Prime Minister Lloyd George instructed those responsible for British war propaganda on the aim and direction of anti-Turkish propaganda:

"The Turks' inability to govern, their misrule and above all massacres of the hardworking population must be emphasized. I hardly need to point out that this should be done gradually and the articles spread over a long period so that our purpose is not too obvious. Sir Mark Sykes' article in the Times is exactly what we want to see."

In this article, which was later spread throughout the United States, expressions such as merciless tyrant, unprincipled bully, unadulterated barbarians, a degenerate race that has littered the earth with ruins, were used. Sykes even fabricated quotations by different members of the Ottoman government. One of the most sensational claims was that it was the Turks who had invaded and destroyed Baghdad, a conscious attempt to interfuse the history of the Turks and the Mongols.

The British propaganda ministry also published a *Blue Book*, a lampoon against the Turks, chiefly inspired by Greeks and Armenians, which expressed an open and unconstrained hatred of the Turks in racist terms.

Even the young historian Arnold J. Toynbee was involved in the campaign and wrote a book entitled *The Murderous Tyranny of the Turks* in which he claimed that throughout their history the Turks had "lamed and beguiled more gifted nations". After the 1912-1913 Balkans wars, the Turks had wiped out all the Greeks, Albanians and Slavs that were left on their territory. The Turks were simply uncivilized: "They have nothing other than a military tradition of violence and cunning."

Not just the English were engaged in this propaganda war. Henry Morgenthau, the American Ambassador in Istanbul 1913-1916, wrote for example:

"Such graces of civilization as the Turk has acquired in five centuries have practically all been taken from the subject peoples whom he so greatly despises. His religion comes from the Arabs; his language has acquired a certain literary value by borrowing certain Arabic and Persian elements and his writing is Arabic. Constantinople's finest architectural monument, the mosque of St Sophia was originally a Christian church and all so-called Turkish architecture is derived from the Byzantine. The mechanism of business and trade has always rested in the hands of the subject peoples, Greeks, Jews, Armenians and Arabs. The Turks have learned little of European art and sci-

ence, they have established very few educational institutions and illiteracy is the prevailing rule."

Another American writer and former Ambassador in Berlin, James Gerard, proposed that the Turks should be treated in the same way as America's Indians and placed in reserves and the French historian, André Mandelstam, added that throughout history the Turks had not "done anything to justify their existence from a civilizatory point of view. They are a fruitless people. Their historical role was to destroy and destruction needs no soul."

In spite of the change of direction that took place after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and, following Kemal Atatürk's secular revolution, the expressed will to integrate Turkey into the western world, the image of the Turks in Europe remained negative. Not least the fact that the new republic inherited the blame for the fate of the Armenian population during and after the First World War was a contributory factor and continues to be so.

Membership of the Council of Europe and NATO after the Second World War did not lead to any fundamental change in the image of the Turk which acquired a further dimension when in the early 1950s the Turks began to emigrate to Europe, primarily to Germany, which at that time was in great need of labor. Simple farmers left Anatolia in the hope of returning when they had earned sufficient money. They could not speak the languages of their new home countries and never integrated. They lived in the same areas and were not open to their surroundings. They were unaware of the negative image the Turks already had to deal with in Europe and they did not know enough about their own culture and history to be able to defend themselves against prejudice. Gradually a new image of the Turk emerged – pleasant, rather boring, not afraid to undertake work but a person at whom you turned up your nose. The word Turk now had the same pejorative meaning in Europe as it had had among the elite of the Ottoman Empire.

Prejudice was reinforced elsewhere, too. The film *Midnight Express*, which was a box-office success all over the world after its premi re in 1978, has contributed perhaps more than anything else to the negative image of the Turks and Turkey.

The film is about a young American who has been given a long prison sentence after being arrested for possession of hash. All the Turks in the film are portrayed as bloodthirsty and sadist torturers with homosexual inclina-

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tions, unshaven and swarthy with unkempt moustaches. However, if you look at the cast it shows that none of the actors were Turkish and many of the most obnoxious roles were played by Greek and Armenian actors. Istanbul is also changed beyond recognition. All the buildings are dilapidated, washing hangs over dark and ominous alleys full of people of menacing appearance and on the pavements idle men with dull eyes sit smoking their hookahs. This European metropolis has been changed into a third world city characterized by violence, disorder and chaos. All through the film, the imprisoned Billy Hayes and his family talk of the Turks as "pigs".

A reviewer in *Le Monde* wrote that the action arouses such feelings of hatred in the audience that when they leave the cinema they wish that such a nation did not exist. There is simply no justification for it.

Oliver Stone received an Oscar in 1979 for his film script. When, during a visit to Turkey in December 2004 immediately after Turkey had been given the go-ahead for EU membership negotiations, he admitted he had overdramatised what Billy Hayes had told him in interviews which were the basis for the film. This received much publicity and was regarded as a kind of belated national redress.

However, the prejudice still lies deep, which may be illustrated, for example, by the definitions of the word Turk in some of our most frequently used dictionaries:

- Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary: One who is cruel or tyrannical
- Concise Oxford Dictionary: Ferocious, wild or unmanageable person
- Random House Dictionary: A cruel, brutal or domineering man

The states that have risen out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire each have their own national liberation legend and their own national historiography and even today there is a tendency to blame all shortcomings and wrongs in present-day society on the earlier Ottoman rulers rather than on the 45 years of communism. In Hungary and the Balkans, the image of the Turk as an oppressor has become part of these countries' folklore. "500 years under the Turkish yoke" is still to this day the explanation for practically all problems from shortages of food, to explaining why the lift does not work and why corruption is so widespread with an equivalent version in Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian and Greek.

The negative image has also been self-inflicted through the economic and political crises and recurring military coups. You have to have lived in Turkey for some time to realize how deeply rooted is the so-called Sèvres complex. The 1920 Peace Treaty of Sèvres would have reduced the Turkish Republic to the areas around Ankara on the Anatolian Plateau and part of the Black Sea coast. With his war of liberation, Kemal Atatürk tore this up and by the Treaty

of Lausanne in 1923, the Republic of Turkey was established. However, many Turks still have a deeply rooted conviction that underlying the world's interest in human rights and the situation of minorities in Turkey there is a hidden agenda characterized by Sèvres, which has led to an often aggressive and contra-productive attitude of self-defense which in its turn has been reinforced by continuous Greek, Armenian and Kurdish anti-Turkish propaganda.

This mentality, which is reflected in the phrase "Türkün Türkten baska dostu yoktur" (The Turk is the Turk's only friend), is now in the process of changing. The dramatically improved Greek-Turkish relations are an example of this. Turkey's popularity as a tourist country and the hospitality, openness and friendliness with which all visitors are received has also contributed to a gradual dismantling of the negative image of the Turk which was impressed on Europe for centuries. As a result, more and more elderly Europeans are now settling in the coastal areas of Turkey as they find the environment there friendlier and more attractive than on the increasingly crowded Costa del Sol or in the Algarve.

More and more Europeans will realize that Istanbul is not a Cairo which happens to partly lie on the continent of Europe but an international metropolis comparable with New York, ('the coolest city in Europe', to quote a cover story in *Newsweek* from August 2005) and that not just Ankara and Izmir are modern cities with millions of in-

habitants but also the towns in central Anatolia such as Kayseri and Malatya compare favorably as regards their European characteristics with the major cities of the new member states. Above all, it will emerge that the Turkey that exists today in European ghettos such as Kreuzberg in Berlin belongs to the past and has not taken part in the development which the Republic of Turkey is undergoing today.

The comment by the former EU commissioner Bolkenstern quoted at the beginning of this paper shows, however, that we have not reached that point yet. In many cartoons concerning Turkey's European ambition you still see Turkey depicted as a backward peasant society in sharp contrast to a modern Europe. References are still often made to Turkey as "the sick man of Europe" and as a monolithic reactionary Islamic society unable to recover without Europe's helping hand. The Turkish characters are often distorted and described as fat, bearded, cunning creatures with oriental costumes and fez regardless

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the fact that the fez was forbidden by Atatürk 80 years ago and that the French secular state has been a model for the Turkish society ever since.

The EU membership negotiations will result in increasing and ever-broader areas of contact and as a result of this process prejudice on both sides will decline. The Europeans will return from Turkey with the same experience as a French traveler in 1652:

“There are many in Christendom who believe that the Turks are great devils, barbarians and people without faith but those who have known them and talked to them have a quite different opinion. It is certain that the Turks are good people who follow very well the commandment given to us by nature, only to do to others what we would have done to us.