

Disrupting Visual Legacies of the ‘Eternal Enemy’

Annika Kirbis

Vienna’s urban heritage includes a plethora of references to the Sieges of Vienna by the Ottoman army in 1529 and 1683, and the figure of the ‘Turk’ as the enemy and exoticized ‘Other’ plays a key role in its commemoration. Over time, the everyday encounter with these manifold reminders, sometimes ‘warnings’, normalized their presence, turning them into a sort of background noise; as such, they are often not actively perceived in the present. It would be a fallacy, however, to disregard or diminish their meaning and impact. Underpinning today’s narratives of exclusion, this essay attempts to make explicit the visual legacies of the representation of the siege with the ‘Turk’ figured as an enemy.

The remembrance of the Siege occupies a prominent place in the memory narratives of the city of Vienna (Dallinger 2016; Rauscher 2010). Johannes Feichtinger and Johann Heiss (2013), two researchers at the Austrian Academy of Science, have outlined in detail how the remembrance of the Sieges evolved over time. Eventually, the narrative boiled down to two key elements of, on the one hand, the threat of the ‘eternal enemy’ and, on the other hand, feelings of triumph and superiority due to defeating the Ottoman army and ‘saving’ Christian Europe. This reductionism allowed for the narrative to be flexibly applied to any ‘undesired’ external influence, with the figure of the ‘Turk’ turning into a

placeholder for, for example, Jewish people, socialists and, increasingly since 9/11, Muslims, Turkish people and immigrants (Heiss and Feichtinger 2013: 10).

Contemporary anti-Muslim, anti-Turkish and anti-immigrant resentment in Austria thereby becomes conflated with a meta-narrative of exclusionism and defence against an 'external enemy' that has been nurtured over centuries. Right-wing extremist parties and organizations make extensive use of these readily available, deeply entrenched narratives and motifs to spread their discriminatory, polarizing political ideologies and programmes. Their invocation is hence a mere reproduction of what is readily available and easy to refurbish in the context of Vienna.

For example, on 13 November 2018, the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) – which had been part of the Austrian government coalition since December 2017 – released a video commenting on the new law that requires electronic insurance cards (e-card) to display a photograph of the owner. Celebrated as a triumph over the allegedly widespread abuse of social security systems by 'migrants', the cartoon tells the story of the racialized fictional character 'Ali', who can no longer use the e-card from his cousin 'Mustafa' to 'spruce up' his teeth at the dentist. The generalization of migrants as fraudulent and taking advantage of the national health system as well as the stereotypically racist representation of 'Ali' and 'Mustafa' sparked massive protest and public condemnation, and the video was taken down from the FPÖ YouTube channel on the same day it was released.

Especially in comparison to the condescending receptionist at the dentist examining the e-card as well as the gloating, pedantic tone of the narrator, the body language and proportions with which 'Ali' and 'Mustafa' are represented signify inferiority and childishness. Most noticeably, these caricatures of the 'Turk' are supplemented



Figure 1: Screenshot from FPÖ video. FPÖ e-card video. 2018.

with a fez, a visual marker employed to trigger a connection to the Ottoman Empire. The fez evolved into a traditional Ottoman headgear in the early nineteenth century in the course of modernization reforms (Shaw 2003: 16). Even after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, when the fez became banned in Turkey during Atatürk's reforms owing to its Ottoman religious and allegedly backward connotations, it remained rooted in Orientalist imaginaries (Baker 2018). Hence, when right-wing extremist parties and organizations reference signifiers like the fez, this invocation is supposed to transport and awaken memories of the Siege of Vienna.

Visually, the fez and more recently the hijab have become representative of the abstract 'Other': the invader and intruder; the one to be kept in check; the one attempting to undermine the system, whether social security provided by the welfare state or the health of the (national) body. This visual grammar has a much longer genealogy than the FPÖ video. Take, for instance, an advertisement for Zacherlin insecticide – a popular consumer good produced at the Zacherl factory in Vienna during the Habsburg monarchy from the 1870s until the fall of the empire in 1918. Annoying at best, but often also feared as the potential transmitter of diseases, one of the insects running loose is depicted wearing a fez.



Figure 2:
Zacherlin advertisement. Archive
Zacherlfabrik, 2019.

Zacherlin powder was available at an affordable price because its target market was lower-income classes, who owing to poorer sanitary facilities and living conditions were often adversely affected by insect infestations. Hence, the fact that the simplistic narrative of the invading Ottoman was deemed an appropriate and effective communication strategy for this advertisement is quite telling. Conflating a caricature of the nuisance of unwanted insects to be eradicated with narratives about the Siege of Vienna further suggests both the availability and popularity of these memories, which were taken to be comprehensible by all parts of society. A military cartoon from World War I takes up the motif as well, depicting a presumably Prussian-German soldier chasing away a Kuban Cossack soldier with Zacherlin insecticide. Precisely because the Ottomans were allies with the Prussians and the Habsburgs during World War I, and hence not available for embodying the enemy figure of the ‘Turk’, the reductive narrative was as mentioned above simply adapted to another, contemporary enemy from the East – the Russian/Cossack army.

Of course, there are instances in which the fez can be encountered in contexts that are not primarily engaged with representing the Oriental ‘Other’ as threat – most famously probably in



Figure 3:
Zacherlín military
postcard. Annika
Kirbis, 2019.

Julius Meinl's logo widely circulating in Vienna's urban space since 1924. Meinl's depiction of the fez being worn by an initially black – since 2004 whitewashed – infantile servant as part of the Orientalist branding for its coffee products, however, avails of a casual exoticism that ultimately upholds and reinforces a clear separation to the imagined 'Other'. Merged with feelings of superiority, this is a prerequisite for the maintenance of the enemy image.

Visual representations directly engaged with siege remembrance may also encompass this element of triumph and superiority, as with the depictions of the heads of captured 'Turks' (*Türkenköpfe*). Nevertheless, there is a clear emphasis on the notion of the Ottomans as a threat and enemy, which, in turn, registers a collective trauma and a perpetual defence mechanism. Consequently, the tropes employed in visual remembrance and representation of the siege gravitate towards the moment of the occupation, assault and (potential) invasion by the Ottoman army. The mosaic 'Turkish assault' (*Türkensturm*) by Karl Drexler from 1965 and the mosaic by Walter Behrens from 1955 depicting Ottoman tents at the outskirts of Vienna serve as examples of this.

Figure 4:
Mosaic
Türkensturm
by Karl Drexler.
Annika Kirbis,
2016.



Figure 5:
Mosaic depicting
Ottoman tents
by Walter Behrens.
Annika Kirbis,
2016.



As mentioned on the website of the project *Türkengedächtnis* by the Austrian Academy of Science under the direction of Feichtinger and Heiss, several artists who produced urban art like mosaics depicting the ‘Turkish enemy’ went to see the siege collections at the Museum of Military History (Heeresgeschichtliches Museum), the Vienna Museum (Wien Museum) and/or the Imperial Armoury at the Art History Museum (Hofjagd und Rüstkammer des Kunsthistorischen Museums) for ‘inspiration’. Typical objects on display that constitute the visual representation of the Ottoman army in these museums include a variety of weapons, specifically sabres and cannon balls, turbans, flags and tents. Moreover, the monumental paintings depicting the Battle of Vienna by Franz Geffels at the Wien Museum and by a previously unknown painter at the Museum of Military History take on a central role in the exhibitions, usually serving as a gathering point for groups of visitors. This visual enmeshment and cross-referencing mutually reinforced the emergence and consolidation of specific images and visual markers representing the siege remembrance.

The persistence of the enemy image of the ‘Turk’ links to its reliability and usefulness in providing a sense of cohesion and continuity. Following Rainer Bauböck (1996) and his analysis of post-war Austria, the newly proclaimed Second Republic of Austria struggled to justify its existence as an independent nation state in terms of ethnicity or language. In this period of time also the amnesia and ‘victim myth’ concerning Austria’s role during the Holocaust consolidated and attempts to trace the alleged long-standing origin of the Austrian nation blended with a nostalgic account of the Habsburg monarchy (Hanisch 1998). It might hence not be surprising that several artists invoked the old enemy image of the ‘Turk’ when commissioned to decorate the façades of residential buildings with new artworks under the municipal sponsoring programme *Kunst-am-Bau*, founded to address the widespread unemployment and precarious living

conditions of local artists in post-war Austria (Nierhaus 1993). Thereby, these popular artworks were to further the sense of community and identity promoted by the buildings themselves, mainly *Gemeindebauten* (a specific form of municipal housing and social apartment construction in Vienna).

Above the entrance of the former headquarters of the building cooperative Frieden ('Peace') at Karlsgasse 14, a mosaic captures this rather empty vision of a post-war Austrian identity. Testifying to this lack of imagination, a white, able-bodied, Christian man stands braving the passage of time. His hand rests firmly on a brick wall, while the other upholds a flying red–white–red flag – and with it a version of history that neither tells us about those who made these bricks nor those who would sustain the process of reconstructing the city in the years to come.



Figure 6:
Mosaic Frieden.
Rodrigo Bandelj
Ruiz, 2019.



Figure 7:
Print of *Mujer Fatale* by
Shepard Fairey.
Annika Kirbis, 2018.

In 2018, just around the corner in the Argentinierstraße, an antithetical image emerged when street artist Shepard Fairey, presumably unknowingly, pasted a print of his *Mujer Fatale*. The print was also captioned with the word 'Peace', and thereby visually disrupted the prior, neighbouring vision of peace and societal order on the Frieden cooperative. Initially inspired by the indigenous women of the Zapatista movement, according to Fairey, the close-up of the half-veiled woman attempted to pay respect to women in their capacity of peacekeepers, holding families and communities together. In a context in which veiled women and peace do not usually go together, this is not decorative art but a potent intervention in public space. Directly opposite the street corner that has also often been used during the Saturday demonstrations of the Kurdish community, this poster reminds us that the choices made in visual language create realities.

When commenting on the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish resentment, it is crucial to simultaneously point out the increasing resistance against these currents, like the increased reporting of racist incidents and discrimination and the revitalized Thursday demonstrations (*Donnerstagsdemonstrationen*). Formed in 2000 as reaction to the first occasion on which the FPÖ became part of an Austrian government coalition, the tradition of weekly demonstrations on Thursdays was picked up again in October 2018 under the slogan 'It's Thursday again!' (*Es ist wieder Donnerstag!*) until May 2019, when the coalition fell apart.



Figure 8:
Protesters with
Fez during
*Es ist wieder
Donnerstag!*
demonstration.
Kevin Kada,
2018.

Bringing together people from across a diverse range of institutional affiliations, but united in their anti-racist struggle, the Thursday demonstrations gathered every week under changing themes, usually in reference to a topical issue. Hence, at the demonstration on Thursday, 15 November 2018, two days after the appearance of the racist FPÖ e-card video, some protesters followed the call by activist Muhammed Yüksek to wear a fez in

solidarity with all 'Alis' and 'Mustafas'. By countering the common representation of a fez in Vienna's urban space as a visual marker of the Oriental 'Other' at best, historical 'enemy' at worst, they effectively turned it into a symbol of protest against anti-Muslim resentment and any form of racism. This intervention highlights the importance of reinterpreting and re-appropriating objects misused for centuries-old visual propaganda by re-inscribing them with new meanings. This task will require unlearning memories and language, ways of seeing and representing in order to decouple deterministic associations and the accompanying lack of imagination about forms and effects of difference.

The renovation and reconceptualization of museums hosting siege collections is a key part of this process. Temporary exhibitions already try to address the shortcomings of obsolete permanent displays, like the neglect of (hi)stories of migration. The landmark 'Gastarbajteri – 40 Years of Labour Migration' exhibition in 2004 and, more recently, 'Geteilte Geschichte. Viyana – Beč – Wien' ('Moving History. Viyana – Beč – Vienna') in 2017 at the Wien Museum address the memories of former 'guest workers' from Yugoslavia and Turkey.¹ Unfortunately, so far no dialogue between the new object collection on migration and the siege collection has been initiated, despite the fact that the discrimination faced by former 'guest workers' and the neglect of their memories are strongly linked to the metanarrative of exclusionism and the siege remembrance.

Hence, accounting for the multiplicity of lived realities among Vienna's inhabitants by moving towards inclusive historical narratives and politics requires to engage with the legacies of the

1 Viyana and Beč are the Turkish and Serbo-Croatian translations for Vienna, respectively. These two languages were the main languages spoken by 'guest workers' in Vienna.

siege remembrance. Be it Vienna's material urban heritage, museum collections or school education – instead of simply adding what has been marginalized it is crucial to debunk the structuring power and entanglements of the siege narrative.

Recently a fresco depicting the 'History of Favoriten' (Favoritens Geschichte), a neighbourhood in Vienna's south, which featured the image of an Ottoman on horseback wielding a sabre, has been overpainted during façade renovations. With the remaining large yellow and brown squares it nearly seems as if 'history' has been turned into oversized pixels, rendering it beyond recognition. However, neither the removal of visual markers of the 'enemy' nor their shrugging dismissal as 'folkloric' remnants will do the work of problematizing them and creating a critical distance. Instead, narrating how the siege has been remembered and written into history, examining how it is mobilized today and where it still lingers on, may provide a path towards 'a world where many worlds fit'.²

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2 'El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos.' Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, Cuarta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona, 1996.



Figure 9: Sgraffito Favoritens Geschichte before its removal. Annika Kirbis, 2016.



Figure 10: Sgraffito Favoritens Geschichte after its removal. Rodrigo Bandelj Ruiz, 2019.

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