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The Islamic Heritage of Central Europe: Revivals and Neglect in the Last Two Hundred Years

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The volume is an original analysis of the modern history of heritage politics in Central and Eastern Europe and contemporary practices of preservations and reconstructions. It describes monuments and processes rarely seen in an international publication and is therefore a welcomed addition to studies about the history and culture of the region. Resulting from papers given at two workshops in Vienna in 2022, the book is the outcome of a European Research Council project titled *Architecture and Orientalizing Style in Habsburg Bosnia, 1878–1918*, of which Maximilian Hartmuth, one of the editors, was the principal investigator.

The history of heritage preservation is little-explored, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe where studies tend to focus on the present situation and are rooted in the social sciences (including political science, heritage studies, sociology and anthropology), with not enough attention to the history of the way states and Empires of the region preserved and promoted the material and immaterial remains of the past.¹ However, the volume under review is more than just a supplement to existing literature. Its main theme, Ottoman heritage on the territory of modern European Empires and nation-states, represents a depart from the topic of nation-building, the dominant framework of most of previous studies.² Therefore, while studies so far have understandably focused on heritage as part of the process of creating or consolidating a national identity, this volume's focus is instead on the often unwanted, unknown or overlooked heritage of the Ottoman Empire in Europe.

From even before its capture of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Empire had gradually expanded into Europe. It was halted only after the failed Siege of Vienna in 1683, but by then it had already kept Hungary under control for more than 150 years, and it ruled most of the Balkan Peninsula until the beginning of the twentieth century. This impressive record of expansion and domination for almost 500 years begs the question why so little is known of its past heritage in South-Eastern Europe? A possible answer is alluded to by the editors

1) Some of the few studies on the topic in the last decades are: Matthew Rampley, ed., *Heritage, Ideology, and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: Contested Pasts, Contested Presents*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012; Gerhard Eimer and Ernst Gierlich, eds, *Kunsthistoriker und Denkmalpfleger des Ostens: Der Beitrag zur Entwicklung des Faches im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Bonn: Kulturstiftung der deutschen Vertriebenen, 2007; Dragan Damjanović and Aleksander Eupienko, eds, *Forging Architectural Tradition: National Narratives, Monument Preservation and Architectural Work in the Nineteenth Century*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2022.

2) Another volume that has a bloc of chapters on the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans is Tchavdar Marinov and Maria Couroucli, *Balkan Heritages: Negotiating History and Culture*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015.

in the introduction when they announce that the aim of the volume is to ‘add nuance to the scholarly discourse on de-Ottomanization.’ Indeed, the nationalist and triumphalist concept of de-Ottomanization, according to which nations formerly part of the Ottoman Empire succeeded to revive their own cultures and overcome the Islamic culture of their previous rulers, obscured the many ways in which Ottoman heritage has survived until today. Some of the prime examples of European Ottoman heritage and the ways modern states and Empires have dealt with are the subject of the volume. The ten chapters give a sense of the complex nature of this heritage, highly dependent on the political and regional context but also imbued with nuances and contradictions across time-periods.

One of the main strengths of the volume is precisely the focus of most chapters on a long time-period, from the nineteenth century to the present, reflecting perhaps also the interests of the two editors in the historical dimension of the heritage and its place in contemporary heritage studies. Chapters on the Behram-beg mosque in Tuzla, Bosnia, for example, or on the tomb of the dervish poet Gül Baba (died 1541) in Budapest, on the Tatar heritage of Crimea and on Ottoman literary heritage demonstrate ways in which the modern history of heritage is connected directly to present problems and discussions around it.

The volume focuses mainly on buildings; only the final one, concerned with literature, is about the built environment. As a result, a central concept, advanced in the introduction, is that of *patrimonialization*, meaning the construction of the heritage in modern times. Generally, the term ‘heritage’ can refer to landscapes, buildings, but also movable artefacts and also intangible objects, so it would have been useful to have a more precise definition of the actual *type* of heritage that is the object of the volume and especially to find out what determined the almost exclusive focus on buildings.³

The chapters are arranged in three groups, each with a particular focus, namely: former Habsburg regions, Crimea, and Waqf or Islamic charitable properties. The final chapter, on Ottoman literature, seems again to stand alone. Maybe the most striking example to be discussed, alongside political contexts that are little-known to an international audience, is the Tatar heritage of Crimea, Russian and Ukrainian historiography on it, and practices of preservation in Crimea. The three chapters give us a sense of the extraordinary rich Islamic heritage in the peninsula and also highlight the ways in which scholars in Russia and Ukraine managed to marginalise it over and over across the past two centuries. Anna Guboglo, in ‘Scales of patrimonialization in late imperial Crimea’ (pp. 89–110) explains how the first systematic interest in the Crimean Tatars emerged in the Russian Empire by way of ethnography and as part of a broader scholarly interest in the Orient, two key ways of marginalising a culture, the association with ‘folk’ and ‘Orient.’ Stefaniia Demchuk in ‘Amazing stories? Crimean heritage and the Reinvention of Ukrainian Art History’ (pp. 111–33) looks at the ethnocentric basis of Soviet and Ukrainian art histories, that have promoted one grand narrative of Ukrainian art while the Tatars were exoticized, at best, or merely dismissed as barbarians and slave owners. In parallel though, as Nicole Kançal-Ferrari remarks in ‘Between destruction, protection, and transformative re-creation’ (pp. 135–74), Ukraine undertook steps to document and protect Crimean Tatar heritage, which testifies to the difference between attitudes of historians or

3) It is worth comparing this volume with *REVENANT: Revivals of Empire – Nostalgia, Amnesia, Tribulation*, an ongoing ERC project that also focuses on (amongst others) the Ottoman Heritage in Europe, but which uses heritage in relation not just to buildings but also sites of memory, cultural traditions, and everyday objects.

art historians, and those who were working with the monuments, restorers, activists, and institutions that are often much more active in promoting a specific heritage. A change of paradigm in Ukraine came after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 when funds were invested to present Crimean Tatars as a part of the national culture, as ‘indigenous peoples of Ukraine’ (p. 147).

The chapters on Crimean Tatar heritage, together with the book as a whole, would have benefited from closer visual engagement with the monuments. The reader does not get a clear sense of what the most important Tatar monuments were, what they looked like and whether they were deemed artistically valuable. The same absence is also apparent in the chapters dealing with the Ottoman heritage of Cyprus, Bosnia, Serbia or in Turkey. Not even when the focus is on one specific monument, such as the extraordinary sixteenth-century Khan’s Palace in Bağçasaray, Crimea, does the chapter explore its most interesting architectural and artistic features. The feeling is that despite the merits of the book and its close attention to the politics of heritage, no space was left for analysis of the monuments themselves.

Returning to Ottoman Crimean heritage, Kançal-Ferrari gives a very accurate critical appraisal of contemporary restoration projects under the temporary Russian administration. The aim has been in recent years to recreate an idealized Ottoman style through restorations and the construction of new buildings funded via the Turkish state. Examples include several Tatar monuments, including the most famous one, the Khan’s Palace, but also in the wider region, the newly built Sultan Süleyman Mosque in Mariupol or the Kadyrov Mosque in Grozny, Chechnya, both modelled after the Ottoman Golden Age monuments. Kançal-Ferrari sums-up the paradox that ‘efforts to articulate the cultural heritage of local Muslim communities are carried out through reference to a former imperial (for Crimea) or an entirely distinct (for Chechnya) cultural and ideological context, the classical Ottoman past’ (p. 183). But what alternatives could there have been? What exactly would have been a building referencing the local heritage and what is the ‘authentic’ Tatar heritage of Crimea? After all, as the authors also show, most of these buildings have changed continuously throughout the centuries and each generation simply brought its own vision and artistical preferences. And what about the views of the local populations in Crimea, Mariupol (when one existed) and Grozny? Is it possible that they agreed and encouraged such neo-Ottoman buildings? We do not know, since Kançal-Ferrari does not consider the views of the local population, admittedly, a very hard to almost impossible task in the current political situation. In Crimea we know that the local population and the tourists are almost exclusively ethnic Russians. From this perspective, to promote the Russian history of the monument comes across as the natural option. Instead of a complex history of Muslims and Tatars in Crimea, it is perhaps not only much easier but also more attractive to focus on the legends and symbolism associated with Pushkin.

However, Ajla Bajramović’s chapter ‘Ottoman until proven Otherwise: Mutations of the Behram-beg Mosque in Tuzla, 1540–2021’ (pp. 37–58) *does* consult the local population and her findings could be expanded to provide interesting insights. She analyses the successive reconstructions and modifications to the Behram-beg mosque in the former Ottoman territory of Bosnia since its construction in an Orientalizing style by the Habsburg authorities in 1888 (the original sixteenth-century structure was destroyed in a fire in 1871). Bajramović

describes the initial building designed by the engineer Franz von Mihanović, referred to in the press as in the style of ‘Arabic models,’ as a Habsburg invention, unrelated to the local building tradition or the Ottoman mosques. Indeed, elements such as the horizontal bands of beige and red, ‘Alhambresque arcades’ and the decorative portico, were all in fashion in Central Europe in the late nineteenth century, and they were not related to Ottoman culture but were, rather, part of an Orientalist and neo-Byzantine set of fashionable architectural motifs. But this first building only survived a few years because in 1895–1899 its dome was replaced by a pitched roof, a new portico was added and the façade was painted in white and beige. Why then, asks the author, do contemporary restoration projects seek to revive this Orientalizing building, in particular since they are sponsored by the Turkish state, which should not, in theory, want to restore a Habsburg building? After conducting interviews with the local population, Bajramović arrives at the answer: they agree with the restoration as they wish to have a building that impresses, that looks original and has the potential to attract believers and tourists.

Bajramović might have gone even further and asked whether the same attitudes were also current at the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps few saw the building as a Habsburg foreign invention and most welcomed it as an original Islamic building. This would not mean that the local population felt into some kind imperial trap but rather that they were active participants in reconfiguring their city with new, impressive buildings that were not in any way perceived as part of an orientalising project. Seen in this way, the local population might not have been the submissive subjects of Habsburg, just as, today, the population of Tuzla has been supportive of the principle of restoration. If we were to expand on the findings in Bajramović’s chapter, we might also find that the Muslim community of Mariupol in Ukraine and of Grozny in Chechnya also accepted their neo-Ottoman monuments, rather than having the buildings imposed on them. After all, the period of classical Ottoman architecture and of the architect Mimar Sinan is one of the most prestigious artistic periods in all Islamic culture. There are perhaps plenty who would wish for such monuments rather than less prestigious ones based on local building traditions.

The volume excels at the analysis of official policies in the specific cultural and political contexts of the time but does not look at the responses and initiatives of the local communities, much harder to grasp as we go further away from present times due to lack of sources on the matter. Even so, most of the chapters are perhaps grounded too firmly in institutional and official analysis looking solely at legal documents, official publications, state institutions. For example, Maximilian Hartmuth in the first chapter, ‘No News as Good News? Occupied Bosnia’s Ottoman Heritage in the Habsburg Imperial Imaginary ca. 1900’ (pp. 15–36) analyses the representations of the Ottoman heritage in the well-known multi-volume description of the history and cultural heritage of all the regions of the Habsburg Empire, the so-called *Kronprinzenwerk*. The article about the architectural heritage of Bosnia, written by the Brno-born Johann Kellner, focused on the so-called ‘Oriental style,’ under which he included all buildings related to the Muslim community, historical as well as new ones. Kellner thus presents the buildings erected under Habsburg rule as a continuation of the Ottoman building tradition and culture, and indirectly presents the Empire as nurturing the Islamic culture. It was part of a strategy of ‘conciliatory modernization,’ in Hartmuth’s words, even if

Islamic heritage remained foreign for most imperial subjects, and was perhaps even seen as trophy of war in a conquered land. But, to use the same hypothesis derived from interviews with the locals in chapter 2, could it be the case that also local populations were involved in adopting the Orientalising style for their buildings? Perhaps they were even influential over the Habsburg authorities and the writers in Vienna because after all the new 'Oriental' style was fashionable, spectacular and easily recognisable as Islamic.

The volume ends with an excellent Afterword by Jeremy F. Walton, who emphasises the main themes and strong points of the book. Accordingly, the chapters demonstrate the double aspect of patrimonialization, to revive a specific past and of 'capitalizing on the past for present aims.' They also describe 'the multiple scales of expertise' (p. 276) in charge of heritage management, but perhaps, above all, they put together a variety of monuments, regions and contexts that are not typically analysed together. Indeed, the volume's geographical scope, from the Balkans to the Caucasus, and the discussion of monuments which do not normally feature neither in histories of architecture of the region nor in bigger surveys, is what makes it of incontestable value.

Walton also thinks beyond this volume and asks: 'how might we think against the grain of patrimonialization' (p. 277), since the chapters have exposed the process as selective, exclusionary and connected to specific political goals? He proposes using the notion of the 'post-imperial uncanny' (p. 279) to account for the ambiguities and unsettling confusions regarding imperial pasts in the (national) presents. It is accordingly a good instrument to think in post-imperial times because it invites 'unanticipated, even unrecognizable forms' as many heritage sites are already 'an invitation to as yet unanticipated futures' (p. 280). The notion indeed invites and includes many possible views, interpretations and actors. It is the opposite of the orderly, comprehensible display that today's heritage managers prefer for their sites, driven by market and political expectations. Today's return to the exotic, romanticised neo-Oriental styles is however, as the volume shows, more than just the direct imposition of political power by eastern strong man. It also responds to the expectation of tourist and of a large part of the population. Perhaps researchers should directly inquire into the reasons for its success at many levels rather than just criticising it. Otherwise, they risk being stuck in an echo chamber that unfortunately becomes ever more enclosed.



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