The Shiite as the Heretic Other? The Nuanced Discourse of Shiite Islam as a Variant of Central European Orientalism

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ABSTRACT

The general autonomy of Central European authors from a Western power agenda as postulated by the mainstream critique of Orientalism is well known. At the same time, scholars have paid much less attention to the attitude of the modern Hungarian, Czech, Polish, and Slovenian corpus vis-à-vis Shi'ism, a narrow branch of the subject of Orientalism. This study argues that a certain bias in this context can be identified on the part of regional academics of the twentieth century, which might be explained by personal preferences for Sunni Orthodoxy. Simultaneously, this paper seeks to explore the reasons for such a tendency within the context of specific historical development at the frontiers. To this end, it presents case studies that juxtapose the relevant experiences with the classic Orientalist criticism of Western intellectual life introduced by scholars such as Edward Said, Talal Asad, Joseph Massad, and Mahmood Mamdani.

KEYWORDS: Islam, Orientalism, historiography, Shi'ism

1   Introduction

The Palestinian-American founder of postcolonial studies, cultural critic Edward W. Said, ventures the opinion:

> "[T]he term 'Islam' [...] is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the 'Islam' in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam."[1]

The corresponding discourse should accordingly be, in brief, no less than what Foucault, in his *The Birth of Biopolitics*, calls a coupling of a set of practices and a regime of truth within an apparatus of knowledge-power "that effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist and legitimately submits it to the division between true and false."[2]

Joining in this critical train of thought, Joseph Massad demonstrates how Western scholars have sought "to proselytize their value system and model of social and political order to all Muslims." Accordingly, "some of the new meanings and referents of Islam had a significant impact on political and social thought [...] in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[3] This corresponds to the period that Mahmood Mamdani considers to have given rise to "the idea that imperialism had served civilization," which "found widespread expression in [...] European thought from natural sciences and philosophy to anthropology and politics."[4]

This time interval identified by Massad and Mamdani, which also constitutes a frame for the present study's theoretical foundations and empirical research, falls within the wider period of the Modern Era that spans from the end of the Middle Ages to the mid-twentieth century. This broader interval also witnessed an increased interest in the East and especially in Islam, which peaked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, there was significant interest in Orientalism, where scholars in Europe were generally keen to study Eastern cultures, languages, and religions, including the various branches of Islam. Among the latter, Shi'ism was a subject of particular interest due to its theological and cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis both an already heterogeneous Europe and Sunni Islam. The era in question was also a period of emerging academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and religious studies. Scholars sought to create a more nuanced understanding of the world's religions, which encouraged detailed studies of less understood or minority sects like Shi'ism.

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1   EDWARD W. SAID: Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the World, New York 1997, p. 1.

2   MICHEL FOUCAULT: The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979, ed. by MICHEL SENELLART, New York 2010, p. 19.

3   JOSEPH MASSAD: Islam in Liberalism, Chicago 2015, pp. 3–4.

4   MAHMOOD MAMDANI: Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terrorism, New York 2004, p. 6.

Such a curiosity toward the Orient and Islam branched out in many directions, rendering the academic fields of Oriental Studies and/or Islamic Studies extraordinarily diverse. At the same time, writers and artists created a broad body of works of fiction and art covering more or less the same areas.

2 The Historical Framework: Struggles, Similarities, and Contrasts with the "West"

2.1 Major Themes as Determinants

If we take a step back to examine our subject in broader context, we may well agree with the historian Vejas G. Liulevicius[5] that four major themes define the region's history, namely, in broad terms: i) diversity, bringing both richness and challenges; ii) struggles related to constantly contested spaces with strategies of local people for survival, self-rule, and, sometimes, cooperation; iii) historical experience that has produced contrasts with the West; and iv) interesting connections with the West. While the first theme is crucially relevant to academic studies and may shed some light on our topic itself, the regional discourse of Shi'ism is to be found at the intersection of the latter three.

To understand the historical concept of the discourse within East Central Europe about Shi'ism, it is helpful to recognize that the region has been shaped by a number of Christian traditions with distinctive local influences.[6] As a consequence, we may speak of a particular identity that was shaped in accordance with notions of an external threat that included, among others, most predomi-

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[5] VEJAS G. LIULEVICIUS: A History of Eastern Europe, Chantilly, VA 2015, pp. 7–8.

[6] In Jenő Szűcs's concept of Central Europe, the author proposes an interconnected development with Western Europe between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. According to: JENŐ SZŰCS: Three Historical Regions of Europe, in: JOHN KEANE (ed.): Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives, London 1988, pp. 291–332, Central Europe underwent Christianization during this period, adopting social characteristics influenced by Western traits. By the mid-thirteenth century, Western-style social developments, marked by the spread of liberties and autonomies, emerged in Central European countries. This evolution resulted in the establishment of self-governing towns, counties, and parliaments in the early fourteenth century. Szűcs contends that, based on these medieval features, particularly the tradition of freedom, Poland and Hungary can be seen as regions aligned with Western development. – Following the nuanced argument of: GERARD DELANTY: The Historical Regions of Europe: Civilizational Backgrounds and Multiple Routes to Modernity, in: Historická sociologie (2012), 1–2, pp. 9–24, here p. 15, East Central Europe is a narrower historical region: "Central Europe—as opposed to the idea of Mitteleuropa—includes southern Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and much of what will be discussed separately as East Central Europe, namely Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Slovakia. The historical heart of the region is the area once covered by the Austro-Hungarian empire. Its centres were Vienna, Prague, Ljubljana, Trieste, Bratislava and Budapest and could be extended to parts of South Eastern Europe."

nantly and in chronological order, the Ottomans, germanophone Empires,[7] and the Russians.

Obviously, none of these corresponding zones of expansion may seem closely associable with Shi'ism per se. Aside from relatively minor overlaps, even Shiite Islam and the Ottoman Empire have little to do with each other—in fact, the latter itself had hostile relations with the Safavid (Shiite) Persia.[8] Still, mindful of the interdisciplinary sociologist Gerard Delanty's statement differentiating East Central Europe from the wider concept of Central Europe,[9] we reach a plateau from which the horizons of historical conflict, regional cultural similarities in East Central Europe,[10] and differences with the West all arise.

2.2 The Ottomans' Socio-psychological Heritage in Europe

For centuries, with their military strength and Islamic faith, the Ottoman Turks represented the greatest threat to European Christian identity beginning with the siege of Constantinople.[11] Having established themselves in Anatolia in Asia Minor, they steadily pressed back against the weakening Byzantine Empire. Even before they finally captured the capital of Constantinople, which sits where Asia and Europe meet, they had already circumvented that pivotal geopolitical location to reach into the Balkans. The Ottomans established an empire there that lasted for 500 years—into the twentieth century.[12]

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[7]   SZŰCS, p. 313; DELANTY, p. 17; Central European writers occupy a middle ground between Western and Eastern European representations of the Turks, since their national identities were developed not only in opposition to Ottoman conquests, but under the direct oppression of the Habsburgs. See: CHARLES D. SABATOS: Frontier Orientalism and the Turkish Image in Central European Literature, Lanham 2020, p. xiii.

[8]   It should be acknowledged here that these historical interactions of East Central Europe—including regions like Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and others—with the Ottoman Empire and Islamic civilizations more generally have varied considerably and by no means always been hostile. In terms of conflict, as we have pointed out, East Central Europe was a battleground between Christian and Islamic forces during periods like the Ottoman-Habsburg wars. These conflicts significantly shaped the geopolitics and cultural dynamics of the region, but forms of cultural exchange with Islamic peoples influenced East Central European societies in terms of art, architecture, gastronomy, language, and technology.

[9]   Cf. footnote 6.

[10]   Interactions with the West have been well-documented since the Middle Ages at the latest, be it in literary genres (chivalric novels, chanson de geste) and given names (Roland, Lóránt, Olivér etc.), pilgrimage accounts to sanctuaries (Rome, Compostella, St. Patrick's Purgatory), the Reformation (Calvin, Luther, Socinus), humanism (Erasmus, Bacon, Comenius), and within certain cultural movements such as the Renaissance, Baroque etc.

[11]   MALCOLM NOEL: Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450–1750, Oxford 2019, pp. 3–4.

[12]   LIULEVICIUS, History, p. 16.

These conquests left permanent traces on the cultures of the Balkans, and for countries further west, they created the lasting image of a powerful but cruel enemy.[13] The fear of the cruelty and military superiority of the Turks since the fourteenth century was shared throughout Europe, albeit with remarkable regional differences according to the degree of direct exposure. In the words of Wolfgang Wippermann, this conflict "left deep traces in the collective memory" even "of the Germans." He concludes, which is again of crucial importance, that from the sixteenth century onwards, this image of the enemy was also projected onto other Eastern peoples considered "barbaric," such as the Slavs—i.e., "those located east of us."[14]

2.3 "Demi-Orientalism," a/k/a *Doppelgänger* of Western Othering

Accordingly, a complex of ideas—"a durable discourse of expectations and imagination," widely shared "unspoken and unconscious" assumptions, and "related stereotypes, recurring images, ubiquitous metaphors"—came to life concerning East Central Europe.[15] Wippermann repeatedly takes up the image of "floods" from the East that "had to be" "contained" or countered by a renewed "German drive to the East"[16]—which was ideologically legitimized by the new scientific discipline of "geopolitics" and which was to reach its climax in the twentieth century. As Kristin Kopp has shown, nineteenth-century literature played a significant role in depicting Eastern European regions, particularly Poland, and shaped general assumptions about the social and political conditions there. A number of German novels by authors like Gustav Freytag and Theodor Fontane used the "colonial idiom" to portray Poland, while travel accounts by German visitors reinforced stereotypes about the eastern territories.[17] In parallel, Bolesław Prus' *Placówka* (The Outpost) discusses the hardships of Polish peasant life and the consequences of colonization by German settlers, critically examining the societal issues of contemporary Poland. This contrast highlights the different national perspectives and the complex historical and social dynamics of the East Central European region.

Likewise, Larry Wolff has delved into the historical origins of the concept of Eastern Europe during the Enlightenment period, exploring how Western European intellectuals of that era constructed and popularized a distinct and often stereotyped image of Eastern Europe. A number of various political, cultural, and geographical factors were at play here, reflecting biases and perceptions prevalent among the Western European elite:

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[13] SABATOS, p. xi.

[14] WOLFGANG WIPPERMANN: Die Deutschen und der Osten: Feindbild und Traumland, Darmstadt 2007, p. 31.

[15] VEJAS G. LIULEVICIUS: The German Myth of the East: 1800 to the Present, Oxford 2009, pp. 2–3.

[16] WIPPERMANN, p. 65: "deutschen Drang nach Osten."

[17] KRISTIN KOPP: Germany's Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space, Ann Arbor 2012.

"Just as the new centers of the Enlightenment superseded the old centers of the Renaissance, the old lands of barbarism and backwardness in the north were correspondingly displaced to the east. The Enlightenment had to invent Western Europe and Eastern Europe together, as complementary concepts, defining each other by opposition and adjacency."[18]

Such a distancing had emerged despite relative interregional European similarities among the described struggles. In retrospect,

"from the perspective of modernity, the core countries of East Central Europe can all be seen as within the broader category of European modernity. Their historical experience has been marked by resistance to absolutism. In the early modern period, especially in Poland and Bohemia, but also Hungary, there was considerable resistance to absolutism, in the case of Bohemia resistance to the Habsburgs and in the case of Poland to the Russian empire."[19]

At the same time, highlighting both struggles and contrasts, a phenomenon that transcends the wider Central European region is also worthy of academic attention, namely, that unlike France and England, which instrumentalized the "'Orientalist' images of the enemy" to legitimize their imperialist ambitions, the (East) Central European nations did not.[20] Here we may underline that East Central European scholars started dedicating their lives to sophisticated scrutiny beyond the scope of direct colonial power relations[21] and conducting studies "capable of understanding oriental languages and handling primary-source material."[22]

Both the East Central European region and the Orient were subject to expansion from the West and to additional, perceived or real, conscious and unconscious, ideological-intellectual strategies. In fact, there is significant similarity in terms of certain exotic premises vis-à-vis these regions despite differences

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[18] LARRY WOLFF: Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment, Stanford 1994, p. 5; MÁRTON PÁL IVÁNYI: Merchants, Sorcerers, Fire Worshippers: "Snapshots" of Persian Culture and the Central European Mirror. The Persian Other in the Portrayal of Central European Orientalist Fiction, in: Central European Cultures 3 (2013), 2, pp. 57–78, https://doi.org/10.47075/CEC.2023-2.03.

[19] DELANTY, p. 18. Delanty goes on to conclude that "within their territories absolute rule was curbed by traditions of rights and privileges of the nobles that set limits to imperial power without representation and eventually provided the ground on which nationalism would rise. This has been described as a political culture of government by estates and differs from western monarchical and absolutist rule as well as from Muscovite autocracy and Ottoman centralized statehood."

[20] WIPPERMANN, p. 22.

[21] SARAH LEMMEN: Noncolonial Orientalism? Czech Travel Writing on Africa and Asia around 1918, in: JAMES HODKINSON, JOHN WALKER (eds.): Deploying Orientalism in Culture and History: From Germany to Central and Eastern Europe, Rochester, NY 2013, pp. 209–227.

[22] URS APP: The Birth of Orientalism, Philadelphia 2010, p. xi; MÁRTON PÁL IVÁNYI: Orientalisms and Central European Approaches: A Nuanced Critique without Colonial Bias. Introduction to a Future Anthology, in: Central European Cultures 2 (2022), 1, pp. 8–31, here p. 11, https://doi.org/10.47075/CEC.2022-1.02.

both in their historical differences and intellectual and artistic tendencies compared to both one another and the West. Still, in contrast to Said's classical model, modes of so-called Orientalist thinking and writing in the region studied here provide a more differentiated idea of the Orient. Hypothetically, their points of view and the layers of the critique presented by them might well differ in terms of their locations on the scale of the "position of strength."[23]

2.4 Identities and Ramparts

There is some truth in the cliché that history has an impact on ways of thinking and collective memory, and in fact, as Liliya Berezhnaya and Heidi Hein-Kircher point out,[24] this influence is particularly tangible in East Central Europe because the region's history is marked by foreign conquests, imperial and ethnic rivalries, nationalism, and frequently changing borders. Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher discuss in detail how these episodes and interactions between different religious and ethnic groups have shaped East (Central) European societies. Of particular significance are the myths and narratives produced during the age of nationalism, which continue to influence people's identities, political and social attitudes, and their perceptions of themselves and their neighbors. These cultural preconceptions have often served as protective "bulwarks" that aim to shield societies from external and internal conflicts while reinforcing ethnic and religious identities.

In short, the prism of a historical framework clearly highlights an intriguing intersection of historical struggles (exposure to expansion zones), as well as similarities with the West (in terms of values and attitudes such as modern nationalism) and contrasts (e.g., relative distance from colonialism).

3 Orientalisms and Islam with Their Respective Branches and Nuances

Obviously, Orientalism, including works of fiction and scholarship, and Islamic studies can take a variety of forms, and Central Europe has produced some distinct variants.[25] At the same time, the subject of these overlapping, inherent-

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23 Cf.: EDWARD SAID: Orientalism, New York 1979, p. 40; SABATOS, p. xix; IVÁNYI, Orientalisms, p. 11.

24 HEIDI HEIN-KIRCHER, LILIYA BEREZHNAYA (eds.): Rampart Nations: Bulwark Myths of East European Multiconfessional Societies in the Age of Nationalism, New York 2019.

25 Cf.: ANDRÉ GINGRICH: Frontier Myths of Orientalism: The Muslim World in Public and Popular Cultures of Central Europe, in: BOJAN BASKAR, BORUT BRUMEN (eds.): Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School, Piran 1996, pp. 99–127; LEMMEN, pp. 209–227; ANDRÉ GINGRICH: The Nearby Frontier: Structural Analyses of Myths of Orientalism, in: Diogenes 60 (2013), 2, pp. 60–66; JOHANNES FEICHTINGER: Komplexer k.u.k. Orientalismus: Akteure, Institutionen, Diskurse im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert in Österreich, in: ROBERT BORN, SARAH LEMMEN (eds.): Orientalismen in Ostmitteleuropa: Diskurse, Akteure und Disziplinen vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 31–64; SABATOS; IVÁNYI, Merchants, pp. 57–78.

ly multidimensional, and complex spheres—that is, the "Islamic world" it-self—is also multilayered and versatile with its denominations and various political, social, and religious facets.

Before outlining our argument, it is necessary to describe the concept that is at stake here, namely, Orientalism. Various sets of Western (European and American) perspectives and representations of the East, particularly Asia, Africa, and the Middle East can be referred to as such. As alluded to above, understood in terms of and coined by Said, Orientalism is supposed to describe the way Western intellectuals and societies have historically depicted, studied, and understood Eastern cultures, often through a Eurocentric lens. These de-pictions can involve stereotypes, biases, and exoticization, shaping Western perceptions of the East as mysterious, inferior, or fundamentally different. Said suggests that Orientalism has been a tool of power, reinforcing Western domi-nance and distorting understanding of Eastern societies. As we shall see below, there are regional nuances here, including the argument's relative validity vis-à-vis East Central Europe and the limitations of such an abstraction. We will subsequently explore a certain intersection of these perspectives, namely, the presentation of Shi'ism in the work of a number of East Central European au-thors (i.e., Ignác Goldziher, Aloys Musil, Muhammad Asad, Gyula Germanus, Tadeusz J. Kowalski, and Marijan Molé), who arguably all share in an intellec-tual trend. This tendency, while it may well have the hallmarks of an order of discourse that systematically posits Shi'ism as the Other, does not or not nec-essarily serve political and social objectives taken for granted by Said or Massad. This paper will more extensively address the figure of Ignác Gold-ziher, who both Said and Massad explicitly discuss due to his alleged prejudice and commitment to Western interventionism and who can be seen as emblem-atic in view of his activities during the era of the Habsburg monarchy and thus especially relevant for the Frontier Orientalism arguments.[26]

The essential central concept here is Shi'ism, i.e., a major branch of Islam, which originated from a historical schism following Prophet Muhammad's death in the seventh century. The central issue was leadership succession, with Shiites believing that authority was divinely designated to the Prophet's family, especially his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, and his descendants, the imams. Shi'ism's core tenet, Imāmah, asserts that imams possess spiritual and temporal authority and are infallible interpreters of the Quran. This con-trasts with Sunni Islam, which believes in leadership by consensus, choosing Abu Bakr as the first caliph. This initial split led to distinct Sunni and Shia traditions with differing interpretations of Islamic teachings and legal systems. Returning to our analysis, the hypothesis outlined above rests on the premise and conviction that "instead of paving the way for political, military, and mer-cantilist expansion, since the late modern period, Central European Orientalists dedicated increased attention to the 'East'" on benevolent scientific grounds.[27]

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[26]   Cf.: GINGRICH, Frontier.
[27]   IVÁNYI, Merchants, p. 8.

Any features of their otherwise nuanced critique may have arisen from an intention to comply with the mainstream and traditionalist branches.

To pursue this question further, a corpus was compiled for review that covers the corresponding themes based on certain works of the following authors:

- Ármin Vámbéry (1832–1913; né: Hermann Wamberger): Hungarian Orientalist, university professor, full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and geographer.
- Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921): Hungarian Orientalist and Islam scholar, a pioneering figure in Islamic studies who specialized in Islamic law and traditions. His work laid the foundation for the field of modern Islamic studies.
- Alois Musil (1868–1944): Czech explorer, Orientalist, and Roman Catholic clergyman and theologian, who traveled extensively in the Middle East documenting archaeological and ethnographic information. In addition, he also contributed to the understanding of Arab cultures and relevant languages.
- Muhammad Asad (1900–1992; né: Leopold Weiss): Galician-born Islamic scholar, diplomat, and writer. He converted to Islam and played a role in the creation of Pakistan. Perhaps most notable for his translation and interpretation of the Quran into English.
- Tadeusz J. Kowalski (1889–1948): Polish Orientalist, expert on Middle Eastern Muslim culture and languages, and author of several works on Arabic, Turkish, and Persian cultures and history.
- Marijan Molé (1924–1963): Slovenian-born Polish scholar of Iranian studies, who also contributed to the fields of Islamic—particularly Sufi—studies and to the understanding of medieval Persian poetry and culture.
- Gyula Germanus (1905–1977): Hungarian scholar of Oriental studies, author, cultural historian, and expert in (and subsequent convert to) Islam; made notable contributions to the study of the Arabic, Turkish, and Farsi languages, linguistics, and cultural history.
- Kelemen Mikes (1690–1761): Hungarian political figure and writer, renowned for defiant activities against the Habsburg Empire. Considered an epitome of patriotic resistance, Mikes also earned the epithet "Hungarian Goethe" and achieved fame through his "Letters from Turkey."
- Gárdonyi Géza (1863–1922): Hungarian author and journalist best known for his historical novels, including *Egricsillagok*, literally "Stars of Eger." His works are considered classics of Hungarian literature.
- Antal Szerb (1901–1945): Hungarian writer, literary historian, and translator renowned for his works in various genres, including novels, essays, and travelogues. He died in a forced labor camp during World War II.
- Vladimir Bartol (1903–1967): Slovenian polymath and writer, renowned for his 1938 novel *Alamut*, widely considered the most acclaimed piece of Slovene literature internationally.
- Miroslav Zikmund (1919–2021) and Jiří Hanzelka (1920–2003): Czech travelers, photographers, and writers. They gained international recognition for their extensive journeys around the world during the mid-twentieth cen-

tury. Their travelogues and photographs documented their experiences in various cultures, contributing to a better understanding of diverse societies.

4   Case Study 1–Belle Époque: Benevolence and "Double Standards"

Ármin Vámbéry's relationship with the (Iranian) Shia was rather ambivalent—at least as much so as his view of Persia as a whole. His Persian travel journal outlines, on the one hand, a succession of bitter experiences he had during the thirteen months he spent in Persia—experiences of zealotry, sectarian exclusion, narrow-mindedness, and religious fanaticism among the Shiites—along with references to clergy corruption. On the other hand, it also contains appealing details of his visits to various Shiite religious sites and ecclesiastical potentates, and in his *The Story of My Struggles*, Vámbéry occasionally speaks rather enthusiastically about Shiite Islam:

> "These people are happy in their Persian microcosm, and I well recollect the disputations I used to have with the Akhondes (learned). These thickly turbaned priests struck me as being remarkably liberal-minded in religious matters. They spoke about Mohammed and his doctrine without any fanaticism, from a purely historical point of view, and did not appear shocked at the most daring hypothesis or suggestion, which surprised me very much, for amongst the Sunnites of Turkey and Central Asia such discussions would have been called blasphemous."[28]

Vámbéry's university student, Ignác Goldziher—whom Said also explicitly mentions in his opus magnum *Orientalism*[29]—while an impressively knowledgeable scholar, also displays at times a clear bias for, in his words, the "orthodox" (i.e., "mainstream" Sunni) Islam. This is evident, for example, in his observation that

> "among the two great sects of Islam, regarding the Shiite sect, there was a much greater tendency to exaggerate sacred legends than among the Sunnis. There, the cult of the saints becomes a veritable apotheosis, linked to the cult of saints, martyrs, and imams from the family of Ali."[30]

Other regional scholars made similar arguments, as we will see. Goldziher then goes on to attribute such assumed inclinations of Shi'ism to having been

> "greatly facilitated by the incarnationist doctrines which the Shiite Muslims had adopted from the Aryan peoples among whom the former represented the predominance of Islam. The Shiite sect of Khaṭṭābiyya, whose adherents no longer worship the imams as saints, but as gods, has risen to the highest excess in this respect."[31]

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[28] ÁRMIN VÁMBÉRY: The Story of My Struggles: The Memoirs of Arminius Vámbéry, London 1904, pp. 183–184.

[29] SAID, Orientalism, p. 209.

[30] IGNÁC GOLDZIHER: Az iszlám: Tanulmányok a muhammedán vallás története köréből [Islam: Studies from the History of the Muhammadan [sic] Religion], Budapest 1881, p. 183.

[31] Ibid., pp. 183–184.

Later on in the same work, Goldziher ascribes particularly violent behaviors to Shiites, referring to "continual wars, civil wars, and bloody battles [of all Muslims] against external enemies" that have been supposed to

> "trouble that part of the Muslim East [...] The vandalism we encounter in this area is unprecedented. The 'Umayyad Mosque' in Damascus [...] was the victim of a fire set by the Shiites near the mosque in 1068 during a skirmish between Shiites and Sunnis [...] It is clear that even the Muhammadan historians themselves did not consider it impossible that the Shiite party, out of sheer sectarian fanaticism, should set fire to the Sunni place of worship."[32]

Goldziher's study also repeatedly stresses fanaticism as a perceived or real quality of Shiites, for instance, when describing Persia, he states, "the sectarian fanaticism of its Shiites is known to be even more than that of Turkish Muslims."[33]

It is important to note here that in the context of the Orient in its entirety, and Islam, more particularly, both Said and Massad report on Western intellectuals' notions about the fanatic Oriental/Muslim Others. In fact, Said explicitly refers to French linguist Silvestre de Sacy, the French author Alphonse de Lamartine, and the Greek-American political scientist and historian P. J. Vatakiotisas examples of such preconceptions,[34] while Massad includes the German philosopher Karl Marx, the French pied noir colonial settler Edmond Doutté, and the American military general Leonard Wood.[35]

Such stances also might well echo a reference that Talal Asad laid out in his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, also quoted by Massad. Aiming to identify certain discursive strategies of Othering Islam, Asad states, "If the European Enlightenment's secular redemptive politics condemn religious forms [...], there is a readiness [on its part] to cause pain to those who are to be saved by being humanized."[36] In other words, what is at stake here is a political cause; followers of the European (i.e., Western) Enlightenment—as reflected in the observations of Said, Asad, and Massad shared here—may describe the oriental Other as fanatical, thus laying the foundation to declare subsequent Western expansionism a form of liberation.

There are a number of factors that distinguish Goldziher's ideas from the more problematic assumptions concerning a Western agenda—disregarding, for the time being, the question of the formers' overall validity. First, it should be noted that several authors have challenged Said's claim that Orientalism universally acts in the ideological service of European colonialism. Robert Lemon,[37] for example, argues that regional fin-de-siecle authors did not employ

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[32] Ibid., pp. 286–287.

[33] Ibid., p. 358.

[34] SAID, Orientalism, pp. 124, 178, 313.

[35] MASSAD, Islam, pp. 62, 71, 103.

[36] Ibid., p. 3.

[37] ROBERT LEMON: Imperial Messages: Orientalism as Self-Critique in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle, Rochester, NY 2011.

oriental motifs to promulgate Western hegemony. Although we may agree with both the Austrian historian Johannes Feichtinger that the Habsburg Empire was not a classical colonial power[38] and with the Slovak-American historian Charles D. Sabatos that Orientalism did not contribute to the building of overseas colonial structures,[39] Orientalism may arguably have fulfilled essential functions in the Habsburg monarchy. Unlike in the case of Western imperial states, whose exercise of colonial power was directly linked to Orientalism (at least according to Said), it arguably served "to secure power over the relative Others."[40]

Secondly, the existing bias and civilizational discourse that resonated within contemporary intellectual life were directed primarily at opposing the Ottoman Empire[41] and more narrowly, its presence in the Balkans.[42] It is worth noting that the "myth" of "frontier Orientalism" during the Habsburg era portrayed the Ottomans as a perpetual external threat. This narrative was used to mobilize and unify the peoples of the Austrian and subsequent Austro-Hungarian Empire against perceived enemies, reinforcing a collective identity rooted in historical conflicts like the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683. Considering the concept of "frontier Orientalism" and its relevant "mytho-logic"[43] somewhat more carefully, one might observe that the Ottoman Turkish-Muslim threat was not merely an epistemological (i.e., ideologically postulated) issue but also an ontological (i.e., existential) one at certain periods of European history. This might be seen in a potentially analogous case of Hospitaller Malta. In the words of Henry Frendo, there were times when "the enemy" was not "fascism, Nazism or communism but the Ottoman Empire and Islam, best exemplified by the (unsuccessful) 1565 siege, a full-scale fight to the finish against the turbaned infidel."[44]

In the broader socio-spiritual context of Hungarian scholars, it is important to note that Turanism was taking root and reaching its peak in Hungary during this period, which is hardly surprising given the flourishing of theories of origin in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As an ideological and cultural movement, Turanism asserts that Hungarians originate from Central Asia and highlights the cultural and historical connections between Hungarians and various Turkic and other Central Asian peoples. This movement gained popularity as an alternative to recognizing European influences, partic-

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[38]   FEICHTINGER, p. 31.

[39]   SABATOS, p. 3.

[40]   FEICHTINGER, p. 36.

[41]   GINGRICH, Frontier, pp. 104–105.

[42]   GINGRICH, Neatly, p. 61.

[43]   GINGRICH, Frontier, p. 62.

[44]   HENRY FRENDO: The Life during the "British" Period: Strains of Maltese Europeanity, in: KENNETH GAMBIN (ed.): Malta: The Roots of a Nation, Gudja 2004, pp. 101–118, here p. 107.

ularly during a time when Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was striving to establish a unique national identity.

Thirdly, even if we consider other motifs of the period to play the role of a power-related demarcation from an imagined, "relative" Other and the creation of national identity[45] with which authors of multiethnic backgrounds, such as Goldziher, may well have identified themselves, the nuances and complexity of their oeuvres nevertheless argue against their being part of a systematic marginalization of the Orient from a globally dominant perspective.[46] Goldziher himself praised Islamic civilization on numerous occasions and portrayed it in a much more favorable light; his work should not be simply dismissed for an alleged sequence of colonial settings. His overall benevolence is reflected in the previously mentioned book, *Iszlám: Tanulmányok*, which contains numerous positive remarks, praising, for example, Islam's moral superiority over pre-Islamic paganism, its soul-cultivating effects (p. 36), its "loving peacefulness" (p. 39), its "genuine humanity" (p. 343), its pluralism of opinion (p. 419), and its receptiveness toward science (pp. 456, 487).

On the other hand, admittedly, Goldziher—in a trend later continued by Marx, Doutté, and Wood—also highlighted a perceived fanaticism inherent in Shia Islam: "The fanatical adherents of Islam, especially among the Persian Shiites, have put into practice" the "barbaric" notion of ritual purity. He goes on to conclude, "their pre-Islamic traditions attached great importance" to the relevant "laws, and these traditions were easily transferred to the Muslim sphere."[47]

Another interesting facet of his study is that Goldziher places Sunni orthodoxy (i.e., the "mainstream" branch of Islam) on a moral pedestal, for example, in terms of inclusiveness vis-à-vis prophetic traditions. He points out, for example, that

> "orthodox Islam shows surprising tolerance toward traditions that are circulated through Shiite authorities. While Shiites reject all traditions of the Sunnites that do not list the so-called 'family authorities' (that is, those related to the family of Ali), most Sunni scholars affirm that the traditional sayings of heretics who do not claim a conversion goal and are not so-called 'extremes' can still be accepted with confidence as authentic."[48]

It is worth mentioning in a broader fashion that Goldziher's generally positive attitude towards Islam might be explained, albeit only speculatively, based on diary entries that suggest he was on the verge of conversion. In fact, he was virtually convinced that he had already become a Muslim; his *Tagebuch*[49] shows just how deeply he identified on a spiritual and mental level with Islam,

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[45] FEICHTINGER, pp. 36–37; RÓBERT GÁFRIK: Review of BORN/LEMMEN, in: World Literature Studies 7 (2015), 1, pp. 100–112, here p. 100; SABATOS, p. xiv.

[46] Cf.: MAMDANI, Good, pp. 28–29.

[47] GOLDZIHER, Az iszlám: Tanulmányok, p. 364.

[48] Ibid., p. 123.

[49] IGNÁC GOLDZIHER: Tagebuch, ed. by ALEXANDER SCHEIBER, Leiden 1978, p. 59.

at least temporarily. Later scholars shared a similar attraction to the "main-stream" (i.e., orthodox or Sunni) branch of Islam, perhaps even more evidently so in the cases of Gyula Germanus and Muhammad Asad.

Regarding the question of the caliphate, again, Goldziher seems to take the majority position for granted, noting:

> "The struggle continued over who was the rightful successor to the Prophet: should the seat of the Prophet be filled by succession, namely by succession through the branch of Fatima, and in this case, first and foremost, by Ali? Or, not by succession, but by free choice? Or, according to the system of seniority in nomadic society? The Quran does not provide an answer in this respect, [as] Muhammad did not appoint a successor."[50]

In a work published almost two decades later, Goldziher makes an observation that takes on heightened significance, especially if considered from a psychoanalytic perspective regarding national identity frames (in such a manner as perfected almost half a century later by the Lemberg-born Muhammad Asad):

> "The more they [the Shiites, i.e., Ali's party] had to endure the cruel persecutions of the Umayyads, the more powerfully did these doctrines intensify among those Persians who had embraced Islam in the spirit of their old national traditions. These doctrines, which had already found their way into the dogmatics of the ordinary imams, passed into the wildest excesses in some ramifications of Shi'ism."[51]

It is not primarily the content but the wording itself that is interesting in another section in the same work later on, when Goldziher claims the "Mahdi idea" was

> "borrowed from the pious circles that bowed to the Umayyads' rule and avoided open defiance, hoping to change bad conditions from rebellion to Allah. But the same idea was resorted to by the pretenders who made the overthrow of the real power the object of their insidious intrigues."[52]

Asad follows, at some points, as we will see in the subsequent section, a surprisingly similar path in his portrayal of Shiites and their attitudes toward the caliphate.

It is important to note once again, however, that Goldziher generally described Shi'ism, Shiites, and Islam as a whole in more objective terms that are in keeping with academic scholarship, despite the points highlighted here and other controversies regarding his alleged support for "European intervention-alism"[53] and the overall ambivalence[54] that comes out in these works cited above.

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[50]   GOLDZIHER, Az iszlám: Tanulmányok, p. 132.
[51]   IGNÁC GOLDZIHER: Az iszlám: Emlékszerű adatok, egykorú kútfők és szakmunkák fel-használásával [Islam: Memorable Data, Using Contemporary Sources and Specialist Works], Budapest 1900, p. 64.
[52]   Ibid., p. 65.
[53]   MASSAD, Islam, p. 62.
[54]   SAID, Orientalism, p. 209.

5   Case Studies 2–4—Themes of the Interwar Period: The Road to Baghdad, Kirmanshah, and Mecca from East Central Europe

The Czech theologian Alois Musil took account of the internal conflicts of Shiites, as Germanus would do a decade later. On his way from Najaf to Baghdad via Kerbela, Musil writes of the latter town, that its "inhabitants are divided into the Awläd Rahik and Awläd Fäjez, between whom there is constant friction, although all are Shiites." This is not what carries importance per se, as, he goes on to state, "These internal dissensions are blamed for the decay of the town."[55]

Later on Musil points to a theme that Marijan Molé later took up, namely, that even individuals from Oriental regions themselves sometimes criticized local conditions—for example, a certain Chief Drejjem Eben Barrak, of whom Musil writes: "Being a Shiite he disliked the English intensely, but could not help complaining that he wished the Shiite Persians were as orderly as they."[56]

These aspects arguably make it possible to juxtapose Musil's scholarly examination with other authors' criticism vis-à-vis a certain facet beyond any direct colonial context. Musil's oeuvre also highlights the importance of not overlooking other nuances when considering works by other Central European authors and whether to categorize these as potential agents of "Frontier Orientalism."

All the more since, for the Czech, in the words of Sabatos, "the greater danger was the loss of independence to the Habsburgs," while the "Turkish [i.e., Muslim as a broader group] menace" was only secondary and served as "a means to preserving cultural identity."[57] However, the narrower particularity of Shi'ism does not seem to be relevant in such a hypothetical mission for national survival.

The most lengthy and powerful critique of all came from Muhammad Asad. In his memoir *Road to Mecca*, Asad relates his experiences in the Middle East in the 1920s (i.e., in the post-Habsburg era) and shares his thoughts on Iran and Shi'ism.

It is in this context that Asad reflects on his enduring impressions of Kirmanshah, the first Iranian city encountered on his travels. His initial impression was one of pervasive melancholy, and this remained essentially consistent throughout the year and a half he spent in Iran. He remarks on the melancholic atmosphere in villages, towns, daily activities, and religious festivals. The religious sentiment of the people, distinct from that of the Arabs, carried a strong undertone of sorrow and mourning. The emphasis on mourning the tragic events of thirteen centuries ago, particularly the deaths of Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, and Ali's two sons, Hasan and Husayn, seemed to overshadow considerations about the broader principles and direction of Islam in their lives. Asad supports this rather clichéd argument with the following still life:

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[55]   ALOIS MUSIL: The Middle Euphrates: A Topographical Itinerary, New York 1923, p. 41.
[56]   Ibid., p. 102.
[57]   SABATOS, p. xiv.

"On many evenings, in many towns, you could see groups of men and women as-
sembled in a street around a wandering dervish, a religious mendicant clad in white
[...] He would recite a half-sung, half-spoken ballad about the struggles for succes-
sion to the Caliphate that followed the death of the Prophet in the seventh century—
a mournful tale of faith and blood and death. [...] And the chanted ballad would
bring forth passionate sobbing from the listening women, while silent tears would
roll over the faces of bearded men."[58]

Asad's attempt to contextualize these impressions from a historical, psycho-
analytical perspective appears to be permeated with a strong bias in favor of
the Sunni "mainstream" similar to that which had also been shared by Gold-
ziher and later was reflected in the work of Kowalski and Germanus.

Asad goes on to emphasize that the historical realities differed from these
emotional narratives. He highlights the division of the Muslim community into
Sunnites and Shiites, attributing the schism to disagreements over succession.
His narrative takes on a more personal and explicitly advocatory tone as he
defends the legitimacy of Ali's three predecessors, emphasizing their greatness
and election by the people. He argues that the struggles for power and the trans-
formation of the Islamic state into a hereditary kingship were a result of Ali
and his followers' unwillingness to accept the results of popular elections.[59]

At this point, Asad introduces a reductionist perspective, which may be de-
rived from European contemporary historio-ethnographic essentialism; he sug-
gests that an "innate melancholy" of the Iranian people can be attributed to the
Arab invasion that shattered Iran's hope for internal revival and led Iranians to
adopt foreign cultural and ethical concepts rather than developing their own.[60]
Another important factor at play in Asad's work is his own personal "road to
Mecca"—his conversion to Islam in 1926 in a Sunni Muslim orthodox mi-
lieu—which may partly explain his severely critical stance toward Shi'ism.

After praising the progress made by Islam, Asad's argument turns into a
speculative contrasting of Iran's glorious past with a present that is bitter be-
cause of the former's loss. The author explores the impact of Islam's arrival in
Iran, acknowledging its social progress but emphasizing the deep conflict it
triggered. Despite dismantling the old caste system, the Iranians, proud of their
historical continuity, struggled to reconcile their cultural heritage with Islam's
monotheism. The abrupt transition from the pantheistic Zand religion to
Islam's Absolute, Asad argues, led to a lasting sense of national defeat, humili-
ation, and repressed resentment, corroding Iran's national self-confidence for
centuries. Unlike other nations positively influenced by Islam, the Iranians are
supposed to have experienced a profound internal struggle and a sense of cul-
tural loss.[61]

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[58] MUHAMMAD ASAD: Road to Mecca, New York 2004, pp. 274–277.
[59] Ibid., p. 276.
[60] Ibid., pp. 276–277.
[61] Ibid., pp. 277–278.

What kind of conclusions does Asad draw here? His subsequent reasoning, influenced no doubt by contemporary psychoanalytic thought,[62] discussed how Iranians, harboring resentment toward the Arab conquest, subtly transformed Islam into something exclusively their own. This involved shifting the rational Arab God-consciousness into mystical fanaticism and somber emotion. The Iranian interpretation of the Islamic principle of God's transcendency evolved into a dark longing for the supernatural, he claimed, with Shiite doctrine providing a channel for the veneration of Ali and his descendants. This Shiite veneration, akin to deification, facilitated the incorporation of the idea of God's incarnation and continual reincarnation, aligning more with Iranian sentiments than mainstream Islamic beliefs.[63]

While it is obviously not the task of this article to weigh the validity of religious teachings or projections of religious (in this case pro-Sunni) sentiment, we should acknowledge the apparent and blatant bias in Asad's claims regarding the excesses and extremes (*ghulat*) of a subgroup against the entire community—especially when such exaggerations are rejected by the Shia majority itself, as Goldziher points out.

That said, we can return to Asad's text, in which he explicitly opposes Shiite beliefs on historical grounds, claiming the Shia doctrine "not only insisted—in clear contradiction to the spirit of Islam—on the principle of apostolic succession but reserved that succession exclusively to Ali and his lineal descendants."[64] Asad eventually unites the earlier psychoanalytic presuppositions with the historical ones and also outlines his belief that the reasons for the specific religious orientation lie at the heart of national identity. In these passages, he suggests that the enthusiastic embrace of the belief that Muhammad's spiritual essence continued in Ali and his descendants by early Shiites in Iran served not only mystical desires but also had a subconscious motivation. The assertion of

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[62] Note that the psychoanalytic thought originated in Central Europe, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, was Austrian, and many of the early pioneers and influential figures in psychoanalytic theory and practice were from Central European countries such as the nations of the Habsburg Empire.

[63] Asad, Road, p. 278. Before we go any further into our content analysis, we should note that the Iranian/Shiite breach in question has been neither an external nor obsolete view. Obviously, "Orientals" themselves may have shared such premises, as pointed out by: Massad, Islam, pp. 295–298. Accordingly, for instance, the Iran-based psychoanalyst Gohar Homayounpour, while crediting Iranians for creating Shi'ism, distances herself from the latter traditions: "We never properly mourned the loss of our glorious past before it was taken over by Islam. Our melancholic response was to create Shiism, which is a culture of mourning, as a way of mourning the symbolic past. One has to bear in mind that in countries like Iran the past is everything, and unfortunately we do indeed breathe the air of regrets." Gohar Homayounpour: Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran, Cambridge, MA 2012, pp. 56–57. In addition, the Syrian-French author Georges Tarabishi also punctuated his texts concerning Islam with psychoanalytic references, see: Massad, Islam, pp. 277–278.

[64] Asad, Road, pp. 279.

Ali's rightful succession implied that the preceding caliphs—including Umar, who had conquered Iran—were usurpers. This allowed Iranians to rationalize their nationalist resentment toward the conqueror of the Sasanian Empire through the lens of religion. Umar was seen as opposing the divine will by depriving Ali and his sons of their right to the caliphate. As a result, the Asad views the Iranian adoption of Shia doctrine as a manifestation of national antagonism giving rise to religious doctrine. The intense veneration of the House of Ali in Iran is described as a symbolic act of Iranian revenge against Arabian Islam, which staunchly opposed the deification of any human personality, including Muhammad. While acknowledging that the Shia doctrine did not originate in Iran and existed in other Muslim lands, Asad highlights its complete hold over Iranian emotions and imagination in a way that was unparalleled elsewhere.[65]

Kowalski shares a narrative somewhat similar to that of Asad and later of Germanus by noting that extreme tendencies, including the complete divinization of Ali, developed uniquely among the Persians. The Persian national character is described as contradictory, marked by profound religiosity and skepticism. Kowalski illustrates this duality in a number of examples that display a combination of deep faith, mockery of orthodox beliefs and mystical experiences, and occasional melancholic pessimism about life, as seen in the poetry of Omar Khayyam.[66]

Here, it is also worth mentioning that Kowalski's pupil Molénot only comes back to the theme of perceived or real Shiite fanaticism seen earlier in Goldziher[67] and Asad[68] but also presents an intriguing dimension of Orientalism when he refers to criticism of the Iranian religious landscape laid out by intellectuals who come themselves from an Oriental background (cf. the case quoted by Musil). For example, Iqbal-i Sijistani, a disciple of the Persian Sufi scholar Simnani, quotes the latter assaying:

> "There is much evil in madhhab [i.e., school of thought of Islamic jurisprudence] fanaticism, and excess is not welcome. I thus heard that in the city of Ray there were two groups, Hanafites and Shafiites. Because of denominational fanaticism, a war broke out between them, and nearly sixty thousand men were killed there."[69]

Germanus approaches Shi'ism generally with a light and entertaining, but at times unabashedly prejudiced, critique, also assuming a pro-"orthodox (Islam)" stance. In a section of his 1936 memoir *Allah Akbar!*, Germanus—who like Asad had converted to Islam by 1930 and summarized his motivations proficiently in prose—illustrates the alleged discreditability of the Shiite doctrines:

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[65]   Ibid., pp. 278–279.

[66]   TADEUSZ KOWALSKI: Na szlakach islamu: Szkice z historji kultury ludów muzułmańskich [On the Trails of Islam: Sketches from the Cultural History of Muslim Peoples], Kraków 1935, pp. 74–75.

[67]   GOLDZIHER, Az iszlám: Tanulmányok.

[68]   ASAD, Road.

[69]   MARIJAN MOLÉ: Les Kubraiya entre sunnisme et chiisme aux VIII-e et IX-e siècles de l'hégire, in: Revue des Études Islamiques 29 (1961), pp. 61–142, here p. 96.

"The followers of Ali, who rely on traditions that are partly true and partly fabricated, hold that the caliphate is inherited in the family of the Prophet." Germanus also portrays the Shiite community as being inherently foreign from Islam, again raising the issue of extremism on behalf of the exaggerators. He discusses the extreme veneration of Ali by Shiites, some of whom even consider Ali to have been the incarnation of God. He suggests that the spread of Shi'ism, especially strong in Persia, was influenced by the Persian "national character," rooted in an ancient belief that kings were descendants of God. Unable to find this divine connection in the Umayyad caliphs, Persians embraced Ali, valiant and brave, as a hero reflecting their cultural background, despite his having been overshadowed in mainstream narratives.[70]

Moreover, Germanus presents the reasons for the denominational divides of the Shiites in a quite grotesque manner:

> "The Shiites soon split into several denominations. Everything was fine until the sixth descendant. This sixth Imam, Jaa'far (d. 765), appointed his first-born son Ismail as his successor, but he was soon caught in drunkenness and deprived of the virtues of an imam. Ismail soon died and his body was put on public display. Many people recognized his younger brother, Musa, as imam after the former's breaking of the wine prohibition."[71]

Germanus expresses concern about the alleged perfidy of the Ismailites, describing their infiltration of gullible minds worldwide to propagate their doctrines and gain influence. He then also goes on to condemn intragroup strife among Shiites, particularly within the Indian Bohras, attributing factionalism to family jealousies and financial motives related to religious leadership. Germanus further offers a skeptical view of the contemporary Shi'ism-related movement led by Aga Khan III, dismissing it as a small and strange aberration of the human mind. Arguably from a Eurocentric perspective, he suggests that such faith-based movements may be rooted in the inability to grasp science and are perpetuated by strong threads of myth and religious bias.[72] Again, it is important to bear in mind that Germanus, as a convert to (Sunni) Islam might have been heavily influenced by the "majority view," and this may explain (or not) this degree of bias. At the same time, it seems obvious that the viewpoint of Germanus, writing well after the Habsburg era, was neither attached to the train of thought of Frontier Orientalism characteristic in the Habsburg monarchy that was supposed to strengthen national identity nor to the Western European imperialist agenda postulated by Said, Talal Asad, Massad, or Mamdani, as seen above.

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[70] GYULA GERMANUS: Allah akbar! [God is Great!], Budapest 1968, pp. 73–74.
[71] Ibid., p. 74.
[72] Ibid., pp. 76–81.

6   Fiction: The Topoi of "Persian Religion" with Violence, Lust, and the Assassins

Even if the purpose of this study is first and foremost to provide an overview of scholarly literature from Hungary and East Central Europe on Islam, it can hardly ignore works of fiction, for example, Géza Gárdonyi's classic, *Egricsillagok* (The Stars of Eger) published in 1901. It should suffice to highlight a single passage in which both religious threat and the sectarian divide are apparent: In chapter 10 of part III, the protagonists are walking in Istanbul and notice the presence of the "arch-enemy" or renegade called Jumurdzsák, when they are confronted with a procession for the Persian mourning festival through which they cannot pass because "the many khanjars [short curved daggers] flashed by religious fury would all have turned against them." Gárdonyi goes on to write that "the Mohammedans and the Shiites [sic] hate each other anyway. The Shiites hold that Muhammad's priests of today are only usurping offices. And the Turks hold that the Persian people are heretics."[73]

The overlaps and the transition between the spheres of scholarly Islamic research on the one hand and stylized literary imagination on the other is embodied in this period by the Hungarian author Antal Szerb, among others. Writing in 1941 about the pragmatism of the "national character" behind Persian poetry, the otherwise undoubtedly benevolent and objective Szerb makes an interesting point that touches on the Shiite state religion:

> "The romanticized country and the contemplative, dreamy way of life of its people also favored the Muses; though their religion forbids wine and confines love to the very prosaic forms of the harem, the Persians have found a way to enjoy and celebrate both wine and adventurous and idealized love in poetic form. Perhaps it was precisely because they had to overcome greater obstacles than Westerners that they became enthusiastic poets of wine and love."[74]

Obviously, East Central European authors' references to Shi'ism long predate the modern era and do not necessarily reflect the same degree or foci of the critical distance conveyed by some scholars of East Central Europe. For instance, essayist Kelemen Mikes, who was well known and applauded in Hungary for his rebellious activities against the Habsburg monarchy, spent the rest of his life in Tekirdağ, where he wrote his *Letters from Turkey*. In this diary, he refers to the "Persian" religion (i.e., the Shiite branch of Islam) on several occasions. In Letter 180, dated 15 May 1750, Mikes describes the branches of Islam as follows:

> "The Turkish [sic] religion is divided into three branches: that of the Saracens is the most superstitious, who hold to the religion of Bubeker; that of the Persians, which

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[73] GÉZA GÁRDONYI: Egri csillagok [Stars of Eger], in: Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár, https://mek.oszk.hu/00600/00656/00656.pdf (2024-07-17), p. 180.

[74] ANTAL SZERB: A világirodalom története [History of World Literature], Budapest 1980, p. 156.

is purer, who follow Hali [Ali]; and the Turks hold to Ömer. These consider the rest to be heretics and condemn them accordingly."[75]

Note that he places Shi'ism here on par with the other two. A little over a year later, however, in Letter 184, he remarks that

"the Turks regard the Persians as heretics, because they follow Hali, while the Turks follow Mahumet, and have a great hatred for each other. So much so that in the court of the emperor, they take prisoner children of all nations, but not Persians, because they say that it is impossible for a Persian to be converted in reality. In short, it is held that a Jew or a Christian may hope to be among the faithful in time, but a Persian never. There are infinite divisions among the Turks over religion, who all explain the Al-Qur'an in so many different ways."[76]

Mikes's acknowledgment of such diversity and divisions between various branches of Islam are reminiscent of those outlined above by later scholars such as Musil, Molé, and Germanus.

The Czech author Karel Čapek's 1922 novel *Továrna na absolutno* (The Absolute at Large) revolves around a nuclear-energy-induced world upheaval, but it also refers to Islam, which it portrays in a rather violent, blood-thirsty manner, especially in regard to the Twelver Shiite[77] Persians:

"With the aid of the Arabian, Sudanese, and Persian armies the Turks had over-whelmed the entire Balkan region and had made themselves masters of Hungary, when the schism broke out between the Shiahs and the Sunnis on what was appar-ently a very important question concerning Ali, the fourth Caliph. Both sects pur-sued each other from Constantinople to the Carpathians with a zeal and bloodthirst-iness which unfortunately also vented itself upon the Christians."[78]

This phase can be juxtaposed with the age-old notion of fanaticism, also de-scribed by Goldziher, Molé, and Muhammad Asad, on the one hand, which may, in turn, have served, on the other hand, as a basis for the originally coun-ter-hegemonic arguments presented by Said and Massad.

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[75] KELEMEN MIKES: Törökországi levelek [Letters from Turkey], in: Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár, https://mek.oszk.hu/00800/00880/html/mikes7.htm (2024-05-11).

[76] Ibid.

[77] Within Shia teachings, the significance of Ali and the awaited return of the hidden Imam are so pronounced that they substantially modify the general doctrines of Islam. This has led to the emergence of distinct sects within Shia Islam, the most prominent of which are the Twelvers and the Ismailis. The Twelvers (Imamiyyah) believe in a line of twelve Imams, with the last Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, having disappeared in 878 AD. Ac-cording to their belief, he is in occultation and will reappear as the Mahdi to establish a reign of justice at the end of times. This sect holds that the Imams are the rightful suc-cessors to Prophet Muhammad and possess both spiritual and temporal authority. Another notable group is the Ismailis, who have further branched out into various sub-sects. These differences are so pronounced that they can almost be regarded as separate, independent religious movements within the broader Shia tradition. See: HELMUT VON GLASENAPP: Die fünf Weltreligionen Hinduismus, Buddhismus, chinesischer Universis-mus, Christentum, Islam, München 1996, pp. 405–406.

[78] KAREL ČAPEK: The Absolute at Large, New York 1927, pp. 193–194.

The Slovene Vladimir Bartol's world-famous novel *Alamut* (published in 1938) is set in the eleventh century at Alamut, which is under the control of Hassan-i Sabbah, the leader of the Order of Assassins, a subsect of Isma'ilism. Hassan-i Sabbah, as the protagonist of the novel, is gathering an army to attack the Seljuk Empire, which has taken over possession of Iran. At one point, Hassan-i Sabbah (consistently referred to as Hasan in the narration of Bartol) reveals to his confidant Miriam, that his

> "father's name was Ali. He was an opponent of Baghdad and the Sunna, and I often heard discussions of these things at home. All these confessional disputes about the Prophet and his heirs seemed vastly mysterious and attracted me with an uncanny force. Of all the warriors for the Muslim faith, Ali was closest to my heart."

This sympathy soon gives way to skepticism, however, as Hassan continues:

> "Everything about him and his followers was full of mystery. But the thing I found most moving was the promise that Allah would send someone from his line into the world as Mahdi, to be the last and the greatest of the prophets. I would ask my father, I would ask his relatives and friends to tell me what would be the signs of the al-Mahdi and how we were to recognize him. They weren't able to tell me anything specific."[79]

A certain character, Abu Nedjm Saradj, shortly thereafter unveils the true aims of wider Shi'ism, which do not fall far away from nihilism:

> "The doctrine of Ali and Mahdi is just bait for the masses of believers who hate Baghdad and venerate the name of the Prophet's son-in-law. However, to those who can understand, we explain, as Caliphal-Hakim established, that the Koran is the product of a muddled brain. The truth is unknowable. Therefore we believe in nothing and have no limits on what we can do."[80]

At the end of the novel Hasan's self-justifying exposition vis-à-vis his former follower, Ibn Tahir, also reveals his national identity-related motivations:

> "I had to do this, because you Iranians are ashamed of your heritage. [...] Because you've forgotten that you're descendants of Rustam and Suhrab, of Manuchehr and Feridun, that you're the heirs to the glory of the kings of Iran, the Khosrows, the Farhads and the Parthian princes. You've forgotten that your language, that beautiful Pahlavi, is the language of Firdausi, Ansari and countless other poets. First you adopted your faith and spiritual leadership from the Arabs. And now you've submitted to the Turks."[81]

Once again, Persian history and its traditions are completely projected onto a subsect of Shi'ism.

This otherwise truly brilliant book presents Shiite fanaticism in the most extreme light, far surpassing criticism of other scholars like Goldziher, Molé, or Asad, and in much the manner anticipated by both Said and Massad. While Bartol takes this genre of representations to a new level, one may not forget

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[79] VLADIMIR BARTOL: Alamut, Berkeley 2011, p. 122.
[80] Ibid., p. 123.
[81] Ibid., p. 335.

that the book, from its very inception, was framed as a search for universal truths beyond Shiite or even sub-Shiite particularities.

In another instance, in an entertaining travel report entitled *Obrácený půlměsíc*, the Czech adventurers Jiří Hanzelka and Miroslav Zikmund include a harsh description of Shi'ism in their section on Lebanon. They write that this religious sect "had degenerated into an army of rabid murderers, sadists, bloodthirsty killers. [...] Alongside religious fanaticism, intoxicating hashish had twisted them out of their humanity, turned them into bloodthirsty beasts."[82] Elsewhere in their account, Hanzelka and Zikmund seem not only to attribute a life of idleness to the supposedly divinely designated and infallible second imam, Hasan ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib, but also to question the glory of his martyrdom. In other words, they call into question the moral justification of the community's veneration of him:

> "[The Prophet's grandson] Hasan went much further, contracting over a hundred marriages, and in Muslim history he was not without reason given the nickname al-Mitlaq, the Adulterer. He spent money with both hands, was up to his ears in debt, but also caused other problems for his respected family. After the death of his father Ali, he became the fifth caliph by right of succession, but after six months he grew tired of the office and sold the caliphate to Al-Muaviya for a paltry five million dirhams. Hassan, relieved of his public duties, went on living happily until one fine day one of his many wives, Ja'da, mixed poison in her favorite dish."[83]

Finally, Hanzelka and Zikmund also point out that the Shiites consider Ali as the Prophet's legitimate successor—i.e., the true caliph—and add accordingly, a historical figure "who, by the way, was a great skirt-chaser and a man with many wives."[84] This might be read as an allusion to Orientalist contextualizations and tropes such as the "Lustful Turks" (e.g., Said[85] and Sabatos[86]) or the "desiring Arabs" (e.g., Massad[87]), with the corresponding premises.

Based on the analysis of these regional authors from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is clear in hindsight that in addition to providing some valuable and informative representations of Shi'ism, they are caught up in a web of literary topoi—hedonism (Szerb), violence (Čapek, Bartol), dissimulative attitudes (again Bartol), and, indirectly, even lust (Bartol once again and Hanzelka/Zikmund) on behalf of Shiites—that have more to do with contemporary stereotypes and attitudes than with any direct national contact.[88]

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[82] MIROSLAV ZIKMUND, JIŘÍ HANZELKA: Fordított félhold [Crescent Turned Upside Down], Bratislava 1962, p. 327.

[83] Ibid., p. 142.

[84] Ibid., p. 280.

[85] SAID, Orientalism, p. 8.

[86] SABATOS, pp. 104, 149–150.

[87] MASSAD, Islam, pp. 152–157.

[88] SABATOS, p. xiv.

Discussion

East Central European thinkers like Vámbéry, Goldziher, and Musil, along with others such as Muhammad Asad and Kowalski, share a parallel in enhancing Western understanding of Eastern traditions through their detailed studies of Orientalism and Islamic cultures. Figures like Vámbéry and Goldziher laid foundational academic frameworks in Islamic geography and law, while explorers like Musil and scholars like Kowalski deepened the knowledge of the Middle East's diverse cultures. Muhammad Asad uniquely bridged East and West by translating the Quran, contributing profoundly to cultural dialogues, similar to Gyula Germanus's contributions to Arabic studies. Literary figures such as Kelemen Mikes, Géza Gárdonyi, and others also played a role by depicting Eastern cultures in their works, enriching the East-West intellectual exchange. Collectively, these scholars and writers illustrate a distinctive East Central European scholarly tradition that offers a nuanced perspective on the Islamic world by challenging simplistic Western views and fostering deeper cultural understanding. With a view to this end, my analysis included case studies that juxtapose these regional interpretations with the classic Western critique of Orientalism.

As we have seen, Islamic studies and literary fiction in Central and Eastern Europe have shown a marked preoccupation with Shi'ism in the modern period. Despite the presence of valuable sympathetic portrayals of the Shia community, particularly of Sevener and Twelver Imamites, the East Central European authors analyzed here often evoked themes of fanaticism, hypocrisy, heresy, and blasphemy. Evidently, even those Central European Orientalists who—like Goldziher or Germanus, for example—have engaged deeply with Islamic cultures without the colonialist overtones often found in Western scholarship cannot totally avoid the typical regional biases despite their relatively nuanced approaches. This necessitates a critical approach informed by Edward Said's perspectives on Orientalism and Joseph Massad's critique on Othering Islam, which highlight the problematic assumptions underlying these representations.

However, the unique perspective of Central European scholars on Shi'ism can be contrasted with the conventional Western view outlined by prominent critics like Said. Central European authors have historical reasons to be distanced from the mainstream Western approach to Orientalism, which often aligns with political or military objectives that favor portraying Eastern cultures as exotic or backward to justify intervention.

While Central European perspectives on Shi'ism may manifest certain preconceptions, they also nevertheless offer unique insights due to their distinct historical experiences with the Islamic world as a whole, differing significantly from the more prejudiced views often critiqued within Western Orientalism.

Historically, East Central Europe's unique experiences, particularly its direct confrontations and cultural exchanges with the Ottoman Empire, have shaped its complex relationship with Islam. These interactions are embedded within a broader narrative of historical conflicts and intellectual endeavors.

Such narratives have traditionally mixed historical truths with mythical elements to create a distant yet exoticized version of the Islamic "Other"[89] from a region itself being subjected to Western preconceptions—a concept referred to as "Demi-Orientalization."[90]

Over time, as historical threats from the Ottoman Empire receded, regional attitudes toward Sunni Islam became less hostile and more understanding. However, this shift often redirected the discourse of Othering toward Shi'ism, highlighting it as the minority within Islam. This is evident in the works of regional authors like Muhammad Asad and Germanus, who, while generally sympathetic to Islam, sometimes subjected Shi'ism to criticism. Many East Central European scholars and writers have been influenced by their personal involvement with Sunni Islam, which may arguably have nuanced their views toward Shi'ism.

First, East Central European history serves to distance these scholars to some degree from certain politico-economic objectives.[91] Second, some of the academics and authors, i.e., modern Hungarian, Czech, Polish, and Slovenian interpretations addressed here, were otherwise generally understanding and benevolent toward Shi'ism (especially Goldziher and Szerb). It is also important to note, third, that some other intellectuals (Asad, Germanus) subsequently converted to Islam and associated themselves with the Sunni "mainstream," and consequently, aspects of their own self-identification might also explain their attitudes.

In summary, although the criticism of Western Orientalist thought may initially seem logical given the peculiarities of intellectual life in East Central Europe, a deeper examination cannot disregard regional, national, and individual nuances that exempt these authors from charges of indirect or direct colonial engagements.

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[89] HAYDEN WHITE: Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, Baltimore 1973, p. 51; SABATOS, p. xviii.

[90] WOLFF, Inventing; cf.: KOPP; LIULEVICIUS, German.

[91] WIPPERMANN; LEMMEN; FEICHTINGER; SABATOS.

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