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# Ambivalent Dealings with an Imperial Past:

The Habsburg Legacy and New Nationhood in ex-Yugoslavia

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**Ambivalent Dealings with an Imperial Past:**

The Habsburg Legacy and New Nationhood in ex-Yugoslavia

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Vienna, November 11th 2003, under the same title.

Current anthropological research on imperial legacies is scarce compared to the vogue of research on empires in the social sciences of the last decade.<sup>1</sup> Since the demise of Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, a huge historical, sociological, and political scientist interest in the question as to why and how empires fall apart has arisen. Over the decade of intense research on empires, several other issues have been brought to the fore, including those that relate to memories of – and nostalgia for – empires. The latter seem particularly in tune with the *Zeitgeist* of Western societies. Nostalgic memories of defunct empires are fashionable not only in the social sciences. Empires are being manifoldly evoked in diverse cultural practices as well as in political arenas. National and regional identities are often being affirmed, and others denied, with reference to one-time imperial states. Meanwhile, memories have also become a substantial topic in anthropology, yet memories of empires are largely exempt from anthropologists' attention.

The survival of imperial myths and their new functions as well as subsequent modifications in new nation-states have also not received sufficient scholarly attention. National(ist) myths, on the other hand, are duly studied, yet their prior embeddedness in imperial contexts, determined by diverse realities of interethnic competition and supranationalist ideologies, as a rule is not taken into account. The dialectics of the imperial and the (ethno)national factor, and the ambiguity of boundaries separating these two categories of phenomena, are seldom acknowledged.

In the present paper, I will focus on one such case of a new nationhood, Slovenia: it had emerged from the former Yugoslav federated state which itself had been basically carved out from two contiguous empires, the Habsburg and the Ottoman. An important part of the ex-Yugoslav territory – largely coterminous with the theater of the latest ethnic cleansing – had for centuries been the military borderland of the two empires. What is now Slovenia, was largely Austrian hereditary lands: Carniola, (southern) Styria and (southern) Carinthia, plus the later Austrian Littoral. This space of settlement of the population that was to be recognized as the Slovenian “nationality” within the Dual monarchy, was contiguous to the imperial core as well as to the military border. Related to this border are varieties of frontier or *antemurale* myths, shared – and reproduced within – both imperial (Habsburg) and (ethno)national ideologies.

Aside from paying some attention to a few more “orthodox” instances of the frontier myth and their utilization for the purposes of the identity management and nationalist politics, I will primarily concentrate on the vicissitudes of a highly efficient national myth, yet largely unrecognized as such, which emerged from a tale from the mid-nineteenth century, containing the motive of the savior of the Hapsburg empire and written by a writer involved in setting up the national literature. Largely neglected over the rest of the century, it grew into a major device for interpreting the everyday life in, and the relations with the outside world of, independent Slovenia.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented as a lecture at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna in Autumn 2003. I am most indebted to Andre Gingrich for his kind assistance, suggestions and attentive reading of the draft. My thanks also go to other members of the teaching staff, Eva-Maria Knoll, Ulrike Davis-Sulikowski, Thomas Fillitz, and Maria Anna Six-Hohenbalken. For further assistance and comments on the present essay I would also like to thank Irena Weber and Mitja Velikonja.

## Anthropology and imperial legacies

Anthropologists have not always been indifferent to imperial legacies. Earlier cultural anthropology for instance developed a considerable interest in them, though largely articulated in diffusionist terms of culture areas, culture contact, culture fusion, and acculturation. Elements originating in the Habsburg culture had been observed in the Iberian peninsula (due to the common Habsburg history), but also in the New World. The Croatian anthropologist Vera St. Erlich took up the Kroeberian notion of the culture style and analyzed the ex-Yugoslav space in terms of diverse styles, such as Oriental, Western (i.e. Austrian and Venetian), and the tribal Dinaric. Oriental and Austrian style, as vestiges of the Ottoman and Habsburg empire, were ascribed a particular piercing force and a life span longer than that of the state whence they originated. Thus, Erlich argued, elements of the Austrian lifestyle, such as gestures or manners of greeting, could be discerned even in Lombardy which had been severed from Austria more than a century ago (Erlich 1968: 87; see also Erlich 1966).<sup>2</sup>

To a certain extent, anthropologists joined the chorus of scholars who have perpetuated the discourse of the Ottoman legacy as an *»imprint left by those centuries of foreign domination«* (Roth 1999: 220). This discourse has in good part been related to the Balkans, which enabled historian Maria Todorova to introduce the notion that the Balkans are the Ottoman legacy (Todorova 1996: 46). The Ottoman legacy was basically constructed as a list of negative culture elements appropriate to serve as a pretext for *»othering«* the Balkan peoples. This view of it is currently predominantly shared by nationalist scholars from the Balkan countries that were carved out from the Ottoman empire, with the conspicuous exception of Turkey.

The anthropologist Michael Meeker has illustrated an alternative approach to the study of the Ottoman legacy which aims at revealing *»the transformative and inventive potential of the old imperial devices in the environment of modernity«* (Meeker 2002: 395). The local elites of the town of Of on the Anatolian coast of the Black Sea are descendants of the local oligarchy from the late imperial period. As the latter had been successfully integrated in military and religious institutions of the Ottoman system, their descendants could keep control over the community throughout the republican nationalist period. As early as 1967, Meeker was able to observe the local celebration of Liberation Day which oddly diverged from the Kemalist orthodoxy. It represented imperial instead of national past. Notables in the cortege were dressed in the costumes of the militia forces of the late imperial period, while the boys of the primary school were dressed as the men of the Imperial College, with moustaches painted on their faces, marching in the janissary style, singing janissary songs and turning to the left and right as they proceeded. The girls of the primary school represented the women of the imperial harem, wearing silk baggy pants, caftans, and gossamer veils (Meeker 2002: 374).

An analogous discourse of the Habsburg legacy as a stigmatic imprint does not exist. Over decades scholars in the nation-states that emerged from the empire have been either *»Austrian blind«* or favorable to the Austrian legacy, regardless of permanent ritual fulmination against *»the prison of nations«*. This absence of the notion of seven or six or four *»centuries of the Austrian yoke«* should also be associated to the fact that west

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<sup>2</sup> Of particular ethnographic interest are Vera St. Erlich's comments on the nostalgia for Austria observed by her in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1940. She claims that all around the country, all religious groups alike talked about the old Austria with the same melancholic affection, enumerating the same benefits of the Habsburg rule. She also notes that her companions were embarrassed because of that, since they had all been eager to overthrow the Dual monarchy.

European perceptions of the whole of the Habsburg empire as semi-Oriental, not-altogether-European or underdeveloped have been rather sporadic.<sup>3</sup>

### Imperial borders as legacy

The Habsburg-Ottoman military border has often been invoked in the local speculation about the national character of the Yugoslavs, most frequently in Serbian and Croatian ethnopsychology (*karakterologija*) of the first part of the twentieth century. Over the 1990s, the legacy of this long-lasting Dinaric imperial border was fully rediscovered in the framework of explaining Yugoslav ethnic cleansing (Carmichael 2002; Baskar 1999), though further progress in its study was no doubt made possible also due to the advancement of the overall research on empires. Though not operating explicitly in the field of imperial problematics, anthropologist Andre Gingrich has contributed the concept of *frontier orientalism* which might prove to be of considerable use in the anthropological study of imperial legacies. Frontier orientalism is conceived of as a systematic set of metaphors and myths that reside in folk and public culture in those countries of Europe which have the history of interaction with neighboring regions of the Muslim periphery. The concept primarily refers to the frontier (or *antemurale*) myths about the timeless mission of a Christian homeland adjacent to the military border, together with the associated glorification of Christian military and other supremacy. As frontier orientalism is a local orientalism harboring the repertoire of folkloristic elements and *lieux de mémoire*, it is especially liable to nationalist political mobilization of its topoi (Gingrich 1996; Gingrich 2003).

In southern central Europe, primarily in Austria, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia, the frontier myths of local varieties of frontier orientalism refer to historical confrontations with Ottoman armies and various raiding parties. Comparative study of these varieties might reveal interesting differences. Compared to Austrian varieties, the Hungarian frontier orientalism has been largely ambivalent toward the Ottoman world, since with the advent of Hungarian nationalism the nation-makers developed a new interest in the Asian roots of Hungarian identity. This ambivalence can be observed for instance in historical novels written by Mór Jókai, the most prominent and very popular Hungarian prose writer of the nineteenth century (Bellér-Hann 1995). Another case in point are Croatian varieties, where instances of profound Catholicism and the associated *antemurale christianitatis* myth have had to coexist with a Turkophile strand of the national ideology aimed at incorporating Muslim Bosnians into the body of the Croatian nation, thus claiming that the latter consists not only of Catholics but also of Muslims (Baskar, forthcoming). In Slovenian varieties of frontier orientalism, on the other hand, there is, compared to Austrian varieties, less supremacism and more lamentation over the Turkish raiding of Slovenian lands. In the nation-inventing discourse of the nineteenth century this lamentation became ubiquitous and played a crucial role in the making of national identity. *The glorious victory of Slovenian frontier orientalism, though, is the one won at*

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<sup>3</sup> Among recent mutations of this perception one may mention Philip Longworth's (1994) study of Eastern Europe where he maintains that countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovenia cannot be regarded as part of the West because prior to 1918 they were under the repressive Austro-Hungarian Empire. »Yet for some unstated reason he largely exempts the empire's core – Austria – from the same reasoning (...)« (Lewis and Wigen 1997: 233). Contrary to Longworth (yet in agreement with him that the Habsburg empire was not part of the West), John B. Allcock endeavors to relativize the impact of the »supposed legacy« of ex-Yugoslav areas, thus arguing against Slovenian and Croatian nationalist scholars who have been explaining differences within Yugoslavia in terms of their earlier incorporation into either the Habsburg (advanced) or Ottoman (backward) empire (Allcock 2000: 7).

the battle of Sisak (1593) where Austrian units, largely recruited from the territories of what are now Croatia and Slovenia, heavily defeated the Ottoman forces of Hasan Pasha.<sup>4</sup> During the communist rule the celebration of the Sisak battle was suppressed from school textbooks both in Slovenia and Croatia, primarily owing to fear that it could have fostered the two respective nationalisms (as both sides pretended that »their« military commanders played the decisive role in the battle). The battle resurfaced in 1993, when its quatercentenary was celebrated by the right-wing government. In the castle which had belonged to one of the military commanders, a group of officers of the new Slovenian Army were promoted by the defense minister, »the hero of the 10 days war«. This anniversary was considered the proper opportunity to address Europe and remind her of the fact that it had been the Slovenian soldiers who saved her from the Turks at the time. From then on the battle has increasingly attracted the attention of nationalist historians. Four centuries old "Turkish" incursions are also being intensely used as an argument against building the mosque in Ljubljana during the present islamophobic campaign.

### **The Slovenians and the Habsburg myth**

In the group of the ex-Habsburg nationalities, one would expect to find the Slovenians among the leading »Austronostalgics« since they enjoyed the reputation of loyal, *habsburgstreue* people. Yet over the decades following the Great War they have hardly indulged in harboring nostalgia for the empire. The Italians from north-eastern Italy who were reputed, together with the Serbs, the worst enemies of the monarchy, are today, on the contrary, among the prominent adulators of the defunct empire. Hence an amazing contrast on the Italo-Slovenian border regarding these attitudes: the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region has been in the Austronostalgic mood for three decades now, while on the other side of the border, virtually one sole monument from the Austrian times has been restored. The incentive for restoring seems to have been local patriotism rather than Habsburg nostalgia (although the two might combine very well). It is a monument to one baron Andrej Čehovin, whose bilingual (i.e. German and Slovenian) inscriptions tell that he was decorated several times for his exceptional heroic deeds in the battles fought in 1848 and 1849 by the Austrian army of marshal Radetzky in Lombardy and Piedmont. Of course the career of Andrej Čehovin, who originated from a humble peasant family and was promoted to the rank of lower nobility for his successful military service, was not atypical. And it is highly reminiscent of the career of Joseph Roth's literary protagonist in the novel *The Radetzky's March* (1932) , who is another Slovenian baron of peasant extraction, named von Trotta: as a young lieutenant he is said to have saved the life of Franz Joseph in the battle at Solferino.

In 1926, the monument to Čehovin, erected near his natal village at the edge of the Karst, was removed and buried by Čehovin's co-villagers because the new Italian authorities were hostile toward Austrian monuments. It was restored in 1987. The initiative to restore it was a local one. The monuments to Habsburg princes and princesses have not been equally lucky in Slovenia. The monument to Kaiser Franz Joseph facing the courthouse of Ljubljana was removed after 1918, and the bust of the famous Slovenian – or Austrian – linguist Franc Miklošič was set on his pedestal. Miklošič is still there on the apparently heterogeneous Kaiser's pedestal, and there has never been any public debate about it whatsoever.

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<sup>4</sup> Hasan Pasha Predojević, the Bosnian Muslim from Banja Luka, had drowned in the river and his dress was taken as a trophy to Ljubljana where it was remade into the sacerdotal coat worn by the bishop during the celebration of the Thanksgiving mass.

The *k. und k.* decoration of a Slovenian officer, the historic as well as the literary one, is an easily recognizable motive of the savior of the empire, which is a characteristic feature of the so called Habsburg myth. In diverse variants of this myth, the Austrian house proves ungrateful to the faithful ethnic supporter, be it the Pole or the Croatian, the Hungarian or the Slovenian. This was obviously not the destiny of Čehovin whose bad health, following the Italian wars was a source of the Kaiser's big concern, so that he lent to his soldier his personal medical doctors in Bad Ischl ...

### **Martin Krpan**

In the following we shall focus on a highly valued piece of prose from the mid-nineteenth century which contains the motive of the savior of Vienna from the Turk, yet was simultaneously conceived as a kind of foundational prose work, exemplifying his author's literary program of the national prose literature. The consequence of this juxtaposition of a motive from the Habsburg myth and a nation-building ambition has been that in the Slovenian literary science this motive was not recognized for what it was. Even one of the leading scholars in the field, who in an article, published in 1991, tackled the issue of the Habsburg myth in Slovenian literature (Kos 1991), didn't mention this otherwise immensely popular story, although he made a systematic review of Slovenian poets who sang odes and other encomiastic verses to visiting Habsburg princes. The story is titled after the name of its hero, Martin Krpan.

Martin Krpan was a robust and ingenious peasant who was transporting or smuggling salt from the Adriatic coast to his home village in Inner Carniola, not far from Ljubljana. Once during a very cold winter, returning from the coast, he met the emperor on his way to Trieste who talked to him but Martin Krpan, without recognizing the emperor, deceived him about the nature of his load, claiming that he carried whetstones and tinder. One year later a 'terrible giant came to Vienna' and started to challenge knights to a duel. When the cream of the Habsburg nobility were killed one after another, including the emperor's own son, the desperate emperor was reminded of the witty peasant from Carniola who had easily removed his heavily loaded mare from the narrow path in order to allow his coach to pass. So he sent for him. Martin Krpan came to Vienna and started to prepare for the duel. As all weapons from the court armoury he took in his arms crushed into bits, he decided to make his own weapons in the smithery. He produced something huge reminiscent of a butcher's axe. After that he went into the Emperor's garden and cut down a young lime-tree above the stone table where the lords and ladies used to sit for coolness in summer. Then he carved a huge club out of it. He also asked that his small mare be brought to him from his home, as no other horse from the court stables was strong enough for him. When he appeared in front of Brdavs, the latter assumed that the yokel will be an easy prey and started to make fun of Krpan. Krpan retorted in a self-assured manner and parried the first stroke of Brdavs's scimitar with his club so that the scimitar bit deep into the soft lime wood. Thus he was able to pull him down from his horse, and with final remarks chopped his head off. The Viennese were much relieved and the emperor was happy and grateful, but the empress was still holding a grudge because of the lime-tree. Instead of accepting the compensation in food proposed by her, Krpan confessed to the emperor that he had lied to him about his load and asked him for the licence to traffic in salt. The emperor agreed and ordered the ill-tempered minister to issue the letter (Levstik 1960 [1858]).

The story was published in 1858 and for the rest of the nineteenth century its impact remained quite limited. Its popularity started to grow slowly but steadily over the twentieth century, when it also started to be perceived as a piece of children literature (which had definitely not been the case when it was written). With Slovenian independence of 1991, however, there was an explosion of its popularity and Krpan

became a ubiquitous national icon and an embodiment of the Slovenian character. Current usages of Martin Krpan in the everyday life of the nation will be discussed later.

The story of Martin Krpan was proposed by its author as a statement of his literary program. The author, Fran Levstik, who has, not surprisingly, earned his place in the pantheon of Slovenian literature, was a typical representative of the first phase of national movements in East-Central Europe, as proposed by the historian Miroslav Hroch. He conceived the story as a model of how the prose should be written. According to his program, the national literature had to be based on the *folk life*, and Levstik was quite successful in discrediting those contemporaries who preferred to write short stories, novels and dramas taking place among urban bourgeoisie as well as rural low nobility. For the rest of the century, the so called *peasant story*, the Slovenian variant of the *Dorfgeschichte*, predominated, whereas more urban – and especially more cosmopolitan, sometimes supranational – writers were marginalized.

*Martin Krpan* is not exactly a typical example of the peasant story genre. The latter primarily developed into the realist and naturalist prose whereas the former rather resembles a folk tale. This impression is reinforced by the narrative strategy since the narrator is not the author himself but an old peasant, a kind of a village sage, who told the tale to the writer one Sunday afternoon as they set on the bench under the linden tree. A Martian might have easily mistaken it for a folk tale, yet such a mistake is less likely made by the natives who have learned in school for decades that *Martin Krpan* is emphatically not a folk tale. This emphasis has in fact become an essential part of received wisdom, as authoritative literary interpreters had strongly insisted on it. They had made it very clear that Levstik was not a romantic collector or an imitator of the folk lore but an artist; and to this effect a new genre was established for *Martin Krpan*, named – in literal translation – the *artificial tale*. This was obviously meant as the opposite of the folk tale: the tale whose creator is the individual artist rather than the transindividual *Volk*. To this day, *Martin Krpan* remains perhaps the only specimen of the genre.

Stating this, it is not necessary to reject the rational kernel of the mentioned interpretation. The author of the narrative was certainly strongly opposed to those of his romantic contemporaries who imagined that building the national literature on the pillar of the folk life boiled down to imitating a folk poet or a folk tale-teller. Our author's notion of the literary prose demanded a thorough reworking, a thorough transformation of folklore or any other materials, and the metaphor he made use of to this effect, was the classicist one of the artist as a bee (Paternu 1978: 244-245). Such a notion naturally also implies that the prose is not written in some dialect (which happens to be the language of materials used) but endeavors in building the national literary language.

Despite the strong caution against the temptation of assimilating the story of Martin Krpan to some folk tradition, the »historical« reading of Martin Krpan started to gain momentum simultaneously with its growing popularity. With historical reading I refer to any reading which assumes that the story contains some historical reality or historical truth and is therefore susceptible of historical and social contextualization. It was in the first place economic historians, ethnologists of law, and geographers who started with revealing the historical context of the story which was one of salt-transporting. Soon it was also found that there were several local oral traditions of salt-transporting and salt-smuggling with different related popular heroes. Since the two provinces referred to in the story (Carniola and the Littoral) were an area of intense transporting of the sea salt, this comes as no surprise. Where salt was turned into the source of all kinds of revenues, there were illegal salt-transporters and salt-smugglers who were, as a rule, appreciated by the common folk and thus found their way to the folk culture as popular heroes (Kurlansky 2003: 232). Moreover, in the very village which bears the same name as the

Krpan's village in the story, the villagers claimed that they knew the precise place where Krpan's house had once stood (Savnik 1951: 149 f.n.) – although it seems probable that this was an invented tradition. Be that as it may, any doubt that the author of our story heavily drew on some oral tradition would be quite unsound today. This is clear, considering our knowledge not only of the socio-historical context and importance of salt transporting in the region over the past centuries, but also the story itself, which contains several formal elements characteristic of oral tradition.

Historians, ethnologists, and geographers who have been elucidating the context of Krpan's salt-trading already from the beginning of the twentieth century, would not agree in all details. Yet they certainly tend to agree that it is impossible to decide whether Krpan carried his salt from the Venetian coast (that would most probably mean Koper) or from the Habsburg coast (*i.e.* Trieste). They agree that the most probable historical time span would have been between the sixteenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century. They also virtually agree that the notion of English salt (since the story always says that Krpan was carrying English salt) refers to Napoleon's continental blockade of Britain, hence to Illyrian provinces and to the scarcity of salt during the French reign which was compensated by the salt shipped in by the British merchants, in the first place from Sicily. The English salt would then be an anachronistic element added by folk imagination.

The study of salt-transporting, salt-trading, and also of salt-producing in the region has developed into a quite intense multidisciplinary enterprise. It would be difficult to decide to what extent all this research was stimulated by the interest in locating and explaining the story of Martin Krpan.

### **Two principal strands of interpretation**

Besides these scholarly efforts by economic historians, ethnologists, and geographers whose findings were to a certain extent acknowledged also by literary scholars, there is another crucial strand of interpretation. This one may properly be called the revolutionary and/or nationalist strand. Its heyday was a period of communist rule, though it existed prior to it and continues after it. This interpretation – which also appears as a deeply rooted certitude – claims that Krpan is the symbol of the Slovenian nation, that he is a nation-builder, even a revolutionary aiming to destroy the Austrian »prison of nations«. The letter Krpan asked from the emperor for his service (which in view of the scholars tackling the salt-related issues is either a trading licence or an exemption of paying gabelle) became in this interpretation no more and no less than the Slovenian constitution!

Such a forced view of things naturally entailed some further distortion, conspicuous for instance in a highly ambivalent criticism of Krpan and his allegedly weak and compromising behavior. One of those scholars, and this as late as 1999, angrily reproached him for having been satisfied with crumbs thrown to him. He claimed that the Viennese gentlefolks were certainly very much pleased to find him satisfied with the letter, as he could have demanded much more by destroying the state and liberating the Slav nations suffering under its yoke (Pogačnik 1999: 265). In 2002, another scholar from the field of Slovenian studies took a more conciliatory, and more ambivalent, view of the onetime empire. After having once again insisted that the story was a "*vigorously rebellious text*", he pretended that Krpan's political demand regarding the right of separate Slovenian cultural identity was politically too dangerous and for this reason postponed. Instead of that, Krpan satisfied himself with a compromise, bearing a prospect of economic prosperity in mind (which perhaps was not so stupid) (Hladnik 2002: 234).

This strand of interpretation, dominant in the Slovenian studies at home, may make one wonder about the capacities of these studies. In what follows it will be argued that, in present Slovenian society the Martin Krpan story acts as a myth. People at different occasions and in different situations are liable to »think with the help of Krpan«. Krpan has become good-to think-with, and Slovenian studies arguably are most addicted of all to having recourse to the Krpan myth as a device for making sense of everyday national life.

Another aspect of the capacity of the Krpan's myth to encourage excessive interpretation can be discerned in the current interpretive mania regarding the real nature of the Krpan's load. The question as to what Krpan was really transporting on his little horse had been asked already by historians and ethnologists who tried to explain the historical context. Within this frame of reference, the question was legitimate and sound. In the 1990s, with the advent of the general krpanomania, however, a couple of other interpretations were proposed, this time not in academic journals but largely in letters to the editor. One person claimed that the term English salt in reality refers to a purgative,<sup>5</sup> while another claimed that English salt is in fact the saltpeter which was used for making the gunpowder.<sup>6</sup> Martin Krpan was therefore a terrorist or the first Slovenian arms-dealer (which sounded profoundly as being in time, with a top political scandal: this relates to the finding at the Maribor airport the cargo of arms on their way to Bosnia). One might surmise some profanating intent or a eschatological passion in these interpretations, yet they were proposed in an absolutely serious manner. The person argued for the saltpeter without any convincing evidence, yet in a way that suggested scholarly argumentation. Despite such cases of serious intent it is easy to notice that Krpan has become a target of ambivalent feelings: of denigration, belittlement and mockery (that may be just the other side of the national self-denigration and self-belittling), but also of admiration and appreciation (that may coincide with the self-satisfaction of the proud-to-be-Slovenians). Martin Krpan thus became a smuggler, a terrorist, an arms-dealer, a wisecracker.

### Uses of Martin Krpan

As was already indicated, Martin Krpan has become a ubiquitous national icon which is being widely exploited in advertizing domestic commodities as well as advertizing Slovenia abroad, such as in the case of the Slovenian Exporters' catalogue for 1999 where Slovenia was advertized as Krpan's land. Krpan appears on the postage stamps; a contest in physical power (i.e. lifting the wooden horse) is inspired by him; a tax

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<sup>5</sup> This interpretation has later received some scholarly support since in a dictionary from 1860 the Bittersalz is said to be identical with the bitter or English salt, i.e. magnesium sulfate (Grdina 2003: 104). This chemical, also known as Epsom salts, was actually used not only in medicine but in industry as well (for dyeing and leather tanning). In any event, the trading with it was not subject to such heavy taxes as salt itself. Claiming that magnesium sulfate was the real load of Krpan therefore entirely misses the historical context.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, no one has dared to notice that English salt is also the name of a variety of large, clear-flaked salt, also known as the Malden salt from the Essex coast. In a like manner, no one has noticed that saltpeter is also being used in curing the food. In past centuries the meat was rubbed with saltpeter in much greater, even poisonous amounts (Shephard 2000: 55–57). These and other cases of the failure to notice the culinary dimension of the Martin Krpan myth are indicative of a hierarchic exegetic tendency to search for higher (symbolic, allegorical, anagogical) meanings in the literal meaning. Clearly it would be too vulgar to see in the food preserver just the food preserver! One exegete thus proudly announced that Martin Krpan in reality transported the metaphor (Hladnik 2002).

consulting agency was named after him. He is equally exploited for local or regional tourist advertizing in places which claim a privileged relation to him, such as his alleged home village, where the alleged location of his house has been marked and a Krpan's trail has been designed by his would-be co-villagers, or the nearest small town where the statue of Krpan was erected. In the mid-1990s, erecting a monument to him was also deliberated by the municipality of Koper, the hypothetical coastal starting-point of his salt-transporting (and one of the biggest Slovenian cities). This initiative is back in circulation; the proposed location of the monument is the entrance to the port.

Aside from this recent metamorphosis into the national hero (or, perhaps, anti-hero), Martin Krpan has also been increasingly connected to a new symbol of the Slovenian coast, the salt from the Sečovlje (Sicciole) salt-pans. There is plenty of irony in the conjunction of these two symbols. In former Yugoslavia, the Sečovlje salt-pans (which originate from the pre-Venetian times) underwent the process of increasing neglect and the salt, deemed of inferior quality, had been used only for strewing icy roads in winter. After the independence, when Slovenia was left with her very short strip of the coast, the latter had to be revaluated and a great deal of attention has consequently been paid to the salt-pans and their corresponding eco-system, as the quality of the coast in terms of bathing and nautical tourism is significantly inferior in comparison to the neighboring Croatian Riviera. These salt-pans and their salt are now by far the most exploited symbol of the Slovenian coast.

Despite its deficient culinary quality which is due to improper methods of production, there has been a lot of advertizing as well as mystique of the Sečovlje salt over the last decade, especially by local ecologists and healthy food-oriented people. Recently the leading national mobile operator has been granted concession to cooperate with the salt-pans enterprise, promising huge investments in restoring the traditional technology of salt-production and developing new trademarks. On their homepage they promised to sell Slovenian salt to the Slovenians; they also stressed the necessity of making them conscious about its value. They should not use the Slovenian salt for strewing icy roads; and they should not buy imported salt. Regardless of these precocious efforts to evaluate a component of the national heritage, another trademark of salt has appeared on the shelves of supermarkets, named Martin Krpan and reproducing his familiar icon on the box. This latter salt, though, is a rock salt imported from Slovakia.

Krpan's attributes such as resourcefulness, mobility, trickery and mediatorship enable the Krpan myth to act as a social charter, thereby validating these attributes that seem to be increasingly valued in the »transitional« Slovenian society. The Krpan hero shares several easily recognizable features characteristic of a trickster, in the first place deceivability, quasi-supernatural power, humorousness, Pantagruelian appetite and perhaps simple-mindedness (see Fox 1995). The association of this mythical hero turned into a central national symbol with the Sečovlje salt-pans also helps legitimizing the Slovenian presence in the previously predominantly Italian environment of the salt-pans.

### »Thinking with« Martin Krpan

Not surprisingly, the Krpan hero has also become a *good-to-think-with* device. Diverse anecdotes, sayings and situations from the narrative are being quoted as exempla in everyday contexts or used to interpret diverse events as well as the character and the typical behavior of the Slovenians (especially in their relations with the outside world). The relations with Europe and the approaching integration with the EU are particularly likely to be deciphered and evaluated through the Krpan narrative. These usages may be illustrated through a couple of instances:

- (1) Recently there was an article published in the leading Slovenian daily newspaper *Delo* titled »And what if Brdavs comes to Brussels?«. The article started with citing several instances indicating how Krpan is currently being used in political quarrels between the Left and the Right, between the liberals (or ex-communists) and the conservative Catholics, between the »Partisans« and the »collaborators«. Thus an author of an article in the very conservative Catholic weekly *Družina* denounced Krpan as a liar (because he lied to the emperor while looking him straight in the eye) and a smuggler who didn't pay taxes and used to beat the government officials; on the top of this, he also lacked environmentalist consciousness (since he cut down the Kaiserin's lime-tree). This Catholic commentator also referred to the archbishop of Ljubljana (the highest Roman Catholic Church official in the country) who had written:

“Since we have now our own state, we still need to make independent the Slovenians themselves. The time has come that, at public celebrations and public performances, we stop glorifying rebelliousness since rebelliousness is not the fundamental attitude of the Slovenian. We don't need Martins Krpans anymore, who don't know their way around the Viennese court and for this reason return to their obscure village with angry indignation. We have conquered the court; the court is now ours”. The commentator of the daily, in obvious disapproval, added his question: “And what if Brdavs comes to Brussels, puts on the mask of the European bureaucracy and calls our (anti)heroes to an uneven duel? What if we'll be putting more money into the Brussels cash box than taking out from it?” (Miha Naglič, *Delo*, 9. 2. 2002).

- (2) The next two instances indicate that usages of the mythical device of thinking-with-Krpan are not limited to public discourses and political contests but may easily enter the academic discourse of Slovenian studies. The already mentioned scholar who very recently reasserted that *Martin Krpan* is a “*vigorously rebellious text*”, simultaneously maintained that Krpan's concession was a politically wise act. Instead of claiming the separate Slovenian cultural identity, he “*was appeased – how reminiscent of current political dilemmas regarding our joining the EU – with the compromissary or partial victory, related to the economic aspect of life and the consequent prospect of the national prosperity*” (Hladnik 2002: 235).<sup>7</sup> And the last case: A literary scholar from the Slovenian Triestine community has recently published a book about the »parallel life« of Italian and Slovenian literature in Trieste titled *The Krpan's salt* (Košuta 1996). He made use of different stages of Krpan's negotiations with the emperor, his wife and his ill-disposed minister before and after the duel as a symbolic framework with which to delineate the successive historical periods of relationships between Italian and Slovenian literature, with Slovenian literature obviously playing the role of Martin Krpan. At the same time it was implied that the Slovenian Triestine literature plays a role of a go-between and interpreter, even smuggler between the Slovenian literature in Slovenia and the Italian literature in Italy.

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<sup>7</sup>Comments of this kind reveal a characteristic ambivalence: on the one hand, there is a usual nationalist criticism of Krpan's compromise-making, on the other, but one can discern an implicit avowal that Krpan was right in withdrawing from revolutionary acts and preferring instead the economic welfare. The same writer goes on establishing that “*to us*”, the Krpan's pragmatic view of the national interest “*has obviously helped to survive*”, and then he exclaims: “*What a pity that Slobodan Milošević and Osama bin Laden haven't read Krpan!*” (Hladnik 2002: 236-237)

### The harasser ignored

Indifference to Krpan as the savior of the empire (which is due to the narrow nationalist perception of him as an anti-Austrian rebel) is further coupled with equal indifference to the identity of Brdavs. While there has been a long obsession with speculating what Krpan was really smuggling, no one in the literary science or other disciplines has asked who Brdavs was and no one tried to historically contextualize his coming to Vienna. Illustrators of the book of course had to answer this question, and one of them, the most popular, whose illustrations still appear in the most recent editions of the story, pictured him as an Oriental, though quite stereotypically and without paying attention to details: it is therefore impossible to identify him precisely as an Ottoman subject. The previously mentioned most recent exegete of Krpan is still happy with a simple-minded observation that Brdavs was an “*alien giant*” (Hladnik 2002: 235) – as Vienna were a town from a fairy tale and not the capital of the imperial state whose subject Krpan happened to be. One Maoist-Lacanian interpretation from the 1970s, though not originating directly from the literary discipline, was only slightly more sophisticated in this regard since it claimed that Krpan the Leninist, fought *Brdavs the Oriental despot*. In this case, Brdavs was identified as an Oriental, yet dismissed from historical concretization as a specimen of a timeless orientalist category.

When I realized that the Ottoman identity of Brdavs was far from being self-evident to my compatriots, I started to inquire at different occasions what my interlocutors, primarily students, thought about who Brdavs was; subsequently a questionnaire was distributed among several categories of respondents (high school students, administrative officials, students of ethnology at a university). The picture I found was similar in all categories: a small minority would be confident that Brdavs was a Turk (one respondent even characterized him as an Ottoman) while the majority would lack any idea about his provenance and were genuinely surprised to hear that he might have been a Turk.

Indifference to the identity of Brdavs is further coupled with indifference to historical contextualization of his coming to Vienna. The contrast is conspicuous: whereas there has for decades been an interdisciplinary debate about the historical background of Krpan’s salt-trafficking, it never occurred to anyone to relate Brdavs to one or another siege of Vienna by Ottoman armies. Oddly enough, there were a few isolated attempts by historians and ethnologists at contextualizing Brdavs. They would recognize him as a Turk, yet a Turk raiding the *Slovenian* lands. Sergij Vilfan, the leading ethnologist of law who was capable of assuming a wider comparative perspective on Carniolan salt-transporting and trading, contributed the best contextualization of Martin Krpan. He nonetheless related Brdavs to an historic event that took place in a Carniolan marketplace when the furious peasants, long terrorized by the lawless and arbitrary *Überreitern* (the salt-transport controllers), massacred a group of them, whence it resulted that there were mostly »Turks« (*i.e.* mercenaries recruited from the Dalmatian hinterland) among them. To put it briefly, it has always been assumed in a way that the itinerancy of historical Krpan was confined to Carniola and the Littoral, in any case to the so called Slovenian ethnic territory (Vilfan 1962; Vilfan 1963).

### A new variant of the myth: Martin Krpan as the coffee-bringer

Let us focus now to an extremely interesting remake of the Krpan story which occurred within the Italian Triestine literature of the 1980s. Insofar as the story of Martin Krpan is a myth, this literary remake offers itself as a new variant of the myth. The author of this variant, baptized Carlo Luigi Cergoli (while he presented himself as the count Carolus Cergoly L. Serini), was a Triestine Austronostalgic of a mixed Hungarian and

Croatian ancestry. His literary opus, and especially his prose works of the 1980s, represent a late development of the Habsburg myth in literature.

Cergoly was quite familiar with Carniola and naturally with the Triestine Littoral. In 1944 he had joined a Slovenian Partisan corps from the region who were, as a vanguard of Tito's divisions, the first to enter Trieste and push the Wehrmacht forces out. In the contested Trieste of Zones A and B, under the Allied Military Government, Cergoly was a convinced independentist (striving for Trieste to become neither Italian nor Yugoslav, but as independent town). For a short period he was the initiator and editor in chief of the independentist daily *Il Corriere del Trieste* where he published plenty of articles and literary pieces, mostly appearing under various pseudonyms. His favorite pseudonym seems to have been *Zrinski*. *Zrinski* (in Croatian) or *Zríny* (in Hungarian) were a powerful feudal lineage in Croatia of the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, famed for their exploits against the Ottomans, of which Cergoly's mother was a descendant. Her name *Zrinski* was subsequently italianized into *Serini* (Hace Citra 1996). An additional motive of choosing this name seems to have been an allusion to Miklós Zríny (Nikola Zrinski), the central seventeenth century personality of the lineage, who wrote a couple of epic poems in Hungarian, the most famous being *The siege of Siget*.<sup>8</sup> The historian Peter Burke referred to this epic as a typical instance of poetry drawing upon two traditions, the learned one in the manner of Torquato Tasso, but also upon the oral tradition of Croatian folk songs (Burke 1978). Similar double reference to the elite literary (and supranational) culture as well as to folk traditions of Slovenians and Croatians is characteristic of Cergoly's prose writing.

Cergoly persistently celebrated the old Austrian supranational order and blamed the principle of nationality for all the evils of the century, and particularly for the demise of the empire. Protagonists of his novels are primarily aristocrats who are in constant move between Vienna, Trieste, Venice, Dubrovnik, Ljubljana and other cities but also visiting each other in the countryside which is often Slovenian. Slovenian peasants and Slovenians in general are emphatically celebrated as the most loyal Habsburg subjects and of all nationalities most attached to the principle of supranationality. In his novel *Il complesso dell'imperatore* (Cergoly 1979), he evokes the situation on the crumbling military front in October 1918. On the Isonzo front the *k. und k.* forces are dismantling. The national groups are being formed who march toward their respective national homelands; only the *fedelissimi* Slovenian regiments insist, still recognizing their Imperial Homeland, still proud of being part of empire. And one can find in his books several other instances of *habsburgstreue* Slovenian protagonists, declaring themselves supranational and Austrian.

In the novel *Fermo là in poltrona* (1984), one afternoon a bunch of aristocrats are sitting in the prestigious Caffè Florian in Venice, busy with exchanging stories. One of them narrates the story of Martin Krpan. It is much shorter compared to the Slovenian original, which means that much of it is omitted, though certain things are also added and other changed. Among other things added, Brdavs appears as the military commander of

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<sup>8</sup> The subject of the epic is the defence of Siget (nowadays Szigetvar in southern Hungary) against the Ottoman army on its way to Vienna in 1566. The commander of the Croatian garrison in Siget was another Miklós Zríny, the poet's grandfather. In Croatian national ideology, the Zrinski lineage have been celebrated as ethnic Croatians. The commander of the garrison thus became "the Slav Leonidas" and is still considered the Croatian national hero. The poet Miklós Zríny, though fluent in Croatian and Italian, wrote his poems in Hungarian. This may efficiently explain why in Croatia he has been celebrated as a Croatian *ban* (and the conspirator against Vienna) while there has been a conspicuous silence on his poetic activity.

the Turks who laid siege to Vienna in 1683. Consequently, Krpan becomes the one who saved Vienna from that siege – in this role he obviously takes the place of the Polish king Jan Sobieski who acts as the saviour of the empire in most versions of the Habsburg myth.

In the novel *The complex of the emperor*, published five years earlier, Cergoly was even more resolved. He turned Krpan into a culture hero who had brought coffee to Vienna – and from there to Trieste. After having killed Brdavs, he entered his tent and noticed sacks full of unusual grain which he took with him. As he was an ignorant peasant, he mistook coffee for wheat. The narrator of this story is the owner of the Triestine coffee-house *Caffè alla Stazione* which in Austrian times used to be a gathering place of the town nobility. He is depicted as a connoisseur of coffee and of poetry, especially of coffee-praising poetry. In this narrative Martin Krpan thus takes the place of the Viennese messenger Koltschitzki who in 1683, according to the widely known legend, brought coffee into the city as a war booty from the Turkish tent.<sup>9</sup>

A couple of years ago my wife presented me with a gift of a pack of exotic coffee, bought in one specialized coffee-shop in Ljubljana. The coffee came with a leaflet telling the legend of how coffee came to Vienna. I have no doubts that the Ljubljanan coffee-dealers would be enthusiastic to replace Koltschitzki with Martin Krpan – if only they knew about the Cergoly's remake. How come then that only a handful of people know about it in Slovenia?

This question indirectly addresses the issue of the reception of a foreign – and supranationalist – remake of an intimate and highly valued national narrative. The remake is seductive since Slovenians are always flattered by Cergoly, and then he has also proposed Martin Krpan as the culture hero who had brought coffee to Central Europe. As a small and not very self-assured nation, Slovenians are generally eager to hear compliments about them. Complimentary comments in foreign press are being routinely reproduced in domestic press.

Since Cergoly is not a widely known author, an average literary critic from Ljubljana may have never heard of him. Those Slovenian literary critics however who know about Cergoly and who act as mediators (and gatekeepers of cultural flows) between Italian and Slovenian literature, have seemingly decided to keep Cergoly away from the readers. Not absolutely, however, since there was a translation into Slovenian of the passage from the novel containing Cergoly's variant of Martin Krpan. It was published in one regional journal for culture in 1988 (therefore with a nine years delay) and titled *The Smuggler and the Emperor* (Cergoly 1988). It was followed by no commentary, except for the two lines long notice about the author, where it was also stated that the text was a *paraphrase* (!?) of the Levstik's *Martin Krpan*. To the reader the status of the text remains unclear since the source is not revealed and the context not explained. I was not able to track any reaction to the publication of this passage.

The only mention of this Cergoly's remake I was able to come across was the book *The Krpan's salt* by the already mentioned Slovenian Triestine literary scholar. Since the book is about the history of the »parallel life« of the Italian and Slovenian literature, its author could hardly afford to ignore the case. But what did he say about it in the book? All he had to say was to ask as to whether Cergoly (since for obvious reasons he didn't mention the name of its original author) committed a plagiarism (Košuta 1996). This critic seemingly ignored that already in 1953 Cergoly translated the entire Martin Krpan story

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<sup>9</sup> For the role of the messenger that Koltschitzki as a historical person assumed during the 1683 siege, and the eventual remuneration for his service by the municipal authorities, I relied on Stoye 2000.

into Italian and published it, under the pen name Zrinski, in his journal *Corriere di Trieste*. It may be that the critic also ignored the other Cergoly's novel with Krpan bringing coffee to Vienna since he didn't mention it at all. To put it briefly, Cergoly's imaginative intervention in the story and the fact that he liberated it from its narrow ethnolinguistic *cloisonnement*, and thereby signalled its wider interest, left absolutely no impression on the national literary scholarship, except some suspicion that this national treasure might have been stolen away from the Slovenians. To those few in Slovenia who were privileged to read Cergoly, the new variant of the core national myth seems to have been a source of perplexity, confusion, embarrassment and suspicion about the real intentions of the stranger.

This suspicion about the intent of a stranger who has intruded into »our« cherished national narrative may certainly be reminiscent of the Michael Herzfeld's concept of cultural intimacy. It may not be a good case in point however, insofar as Herzfeld relates to cultural intimacy primarily those features that are the sources of perennial embarrassment for national leaders vis-à-vis significant outsiders (see Herzfeld 1997: 6–7). Martin Krpan as the national (anti)hero and the icon of the national character is basically the source of pride, not of embarrassment. Several outsider anthropologists who did research on Slovenians in Trieste have reported that they had been told the story of Martin Krpan during the first weeks of their fieldwork (Poche 1993; Kappus 1997). Their interlocutors were primarily academics who were decidedly not hesitant in telling it. We should not neglect however the already indicated annoyance of the right-wing intelligentsia who are afraid that the krpanesque misbehavior in Vienna has been a source of disgrace for the nation.

### Concluding remarks

It remains to be stated that the story of Martin Krpan, notwithstanding the fact that its first author was a cultural nationalist, offers no resistance to the loyalist Habsburg interpretation. The nationalist reading of the narrative is much more forced than the supranationalist one, although, to a limited extent, the narrative allows both readings. Krpan is without any doubt critical of the court, but trustful of the emperor who sincerely appreciates him. The emperor is a good and honest man, encompassed by the courtiers who are unfriendly. Nationalist readings have persistently been silent about the Krpan's words to the emperor at farewell: "*If another Brdavs or any one else of that breed should come here again, you know where to find (me)*" (Levstik 1960 [1858]: 29).

The blindness of literary interpreters for Martin Krpan's loyalty surely implies a radical absence of any comparative perspective on the nations comprised within the empire as well as on their literatures, not to mention the ambiguous interactions of the latter with the supranational Austrian literature. The blindness of the audience, on the other hand, might be primarily revealing of the impact of the national educational system which persistently imposes the notion of Martin Krpan as a rebel. Yet loyalty as an assumed trait of the Slovenian national character has nevertheless been widely acknowledged, especially when opposed to the alleged perfidiousness of ex-Yugoslav "Southern brothers". This loyalty has also been clearly recognized as a result of a more than one thousand years long "acculturation" of Slovenians under the Germanic rule of Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburgs. After 1989, the "long German rule" underwent sublimation and has become the "more than one thousand years long belonging to Europe" – longer than that of the Spanish and the Portuguese, as one flattering historian put it in a somewhat self-congratulatory manner.

At first glance the recognition by nationalist commentators that the national character or identity might not be a purely endogenous ethnic crystallization but an outcome of the interactions within the multiethnic imperial frame seems paradoxical. Yet we have already had an occasion to notice an implicit recognition of the “external”, Habsburg aspect of Martin Krpan’s, and *eo ipso*, Slovenian character in the case of the literary scholar who admitted that Krpan was right, and European, in pragmatically preferring economic prosperity to heroic misery of the Serbs. It seems that in such cases the boundary between the endogenous and exogenous, the Slovenian and Austrian, the ethnonational and supranational-imperial, may temporarily be suspended. In the favorable environment the national character may be viewed as an imperial legacy. A further step in this direction will be made with recognizing that also the Krpan narrative, though a quintessential national myth, may simultaneously be part of the Habsburg legacy.

The present krpanomania which is still gaining momentum might thus be indicative of a tension in the Slovenian dialectic of the Self and Other on the eve of entering the EU. Very recently a cartoon in the leading daily has featured Martin Krpan in his peasant costume, covered with his large round hat and wearing the linden club on the shoulder, entering the plane on the flight to Brussels. The cartoon referred to the nomination of the Slovenian commissary which aroused some domestic interest, generated by the mass media, in to what duty he was going to be appointed in the European capital. In the icon of the (anti)hero, as well as in the mass media speculation about the possible jobs and bosses of the Slovenian commissary, much ambivalence and anxiety was condensed, as well as self-irony.

Combining the study of the *longue durée* aspect of a myth (or a set of related or overlapping myths) with the ethnography of its present readings and uses may facilitate and improve our anthropological insight into the working of myths. It may also be of significant help, as it is in our case, in properly identifying relevant national myths. Relying in our case only on the mechanical taxonomy of national myths according to their thematic variety would probably mean to entirely overlook the Krpan myth. One would perhaps focus instead on the battle of Sisak from 1593 and the not very successful attempt to reinvent it as a national victory in 1993 and after. The conclusion that *antemurale* myths have lost their appeal among Slovenians would hence impose itself. Locating the Krpan myth in the whole complexity of its contexts and interpreting it by drawing together its diverse strands (oral traditions, elements of folk culture, a frontier myth, a Habsburg myth, a nationalist myth...), on the contrary, suggest that this kind of myths can still (or increasingly) strongly resonate if woven into a richer, more ironically sounding and less obviously frontier orientalist repertoire. Bringing the *longue durée* in also helps to realize that invention (of national myths, of tradition, etc.) cannot successfully proceed arbitrarily, *i.e.* without paying attention to the quiddity of its signifying materials.

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