“Our Turks”, or “real Turks”? Czech perceptions of the Slavic Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina

Frontier Orientalism. Czech Orientalism. Slavic Muslims. Ottoman Turks. Muslim women.

The article examines Czech views of the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and compares them to their opinions on the Ottoman Turks. It asks to what extent Czech perceptions of these two groups correspond to the distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims suggested by Andre Gingrich in his concept of “frontier Orientalism”. Special attention is devoted to images of Muslim women who, according to Gingrich, hardly figured in the frontier version of Orientalism. Czech experiences with the Ottoman Empire differed from those of other Central and South East Europeans, and Czechs’ views of the Ottoman Turks were influenced by Western Orientalist discourse. In Bosnia-Herzego­vina, in contrast, the Czechs’ position was closer to the Austrians’ civilizing mission and their frontier Orientalism, but it was complicated by the fact that the local population was Slavic, like the Czechs themselves. Thus, Czech perceptions of the Slavic Muslims were ambivalent and oscillated between identifying the Muslims with the Ottoman Turks, and viewing them as Slavic brothers. The ambivalence concerned also Muslim women, who were portrayed as different from (Ottoman) Turkish women, but at the same time often seen through Orientalist lenses.

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