

BOUNDARIES AND FRONTLINES: the Balkans, the Great War and Austrian Anthropology

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first publication

1 Heinrich, Angelika: Franz Hegers Reisen und Ausgrabungen im Kaukasus und die Entstehung der »Sammlung Kaukasischer Altertümer« im Naturhistorischen Museum in Wien. In: Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien 136/137 (2006/07), pp. 107-143, pp. 115-116.

2 Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv, Oberstkämmerer-Amt, R 55 1917, Nr 55, Heger an Intendanz des Naturhistorischen Hofmuseums, 07.08.1917.

3 Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, OKäA R 55 1917, Nr 3230, Michael Haberlandt: Bitte um Überlassung ethnographischer Gegenstände an das Kaiser Karl Museum, 07.07.1917.

4 Feest, Christian F.: Haberlandtiana. Michael Haberlandt an der anthropologisch-ethnographischen Abteilung des k.k. Naturhistorischen Hofmuseums, 1885–1911. In: Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde 108/59 (2005), pp. 251-273.

5 Baskar, Bojan: Small National Ethnologies and Supranational Empires: The Case of the Habsburg Monarchy. In: Máiréad, Nic Craith (Ed.): Everyday Culture in Europe. Approaches and Methodologies. Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate 2008, pp. 65-80.

In late summer and autumn 1917 two rival parties were engaged in vehement trench warfare for the dominance over Southeast Europe. The two factions activated all their resources, mobilized their allies, and launched ambushes. After one side had to withdraw, exhausted by the arduous struggle, the triumph of the rival soon turned out a pyrrhic victory, as the winner could not for long take pride in his gains.

This paper seeks to outline what may be called a »Habsburg legacy« in Balkan Studies. Focused on the development of the discipline of anthropology in Vienna in the context of WWI, it is the outcome of a collaborative research project on war experience. The conflict to be the theme of this paper, outlined above, did not take place on the battlefields of WWI, where the civilised European nations teamed modern technology with brutal barbarism. Instead, it was fought between two different branches of an academic discipline, the common object of which might be described as cultural anthropology, as represented by two rival museum institutions; or, to be more precise, it was a conflict between two older men: Franz Heger, the head of the anthropological-ethnographical department of the Viennese *Hofmuseum*, then aged 64, and Michael Haberlandt, then 57, formerly an inferior of Heger but later promoted to director of the *Kaiser Karl Museum für österreichische Volkskunde*. Heger, a trained geologist, had inherited the museum department and its vast collection from his late mentor Ferdinand von Hochstetter. He was in fact the Habsburg Empire's first public servant to make a living from ethnology (*German Völkerkunde*).¹ Heger conducted fieldwork in the Far East, Transcaucasia, Indonesia, India, and in South America. In the conflict with Haberlandt – and it was not the first between them – Heger argued that the study of Balkan culture, which he saw as deeply imbued with an »Asiatic« Ottoman culture, could only produce coherent results if practiced in the context of a global ethnography. Therefore, it would fall within the scope of *his* museum department, rather than Haberlandt's.²

Haberlandt was similarly engaged in intense lobbying to secure a prerogative of his institution in researching the culture of the Balkan countries. Noting that, because of the war, public interest for the ethnographic borderlands of the empire and especially the Balkan peninsula had increased, he argued that this demand could best be met by his museum, for it facilitated comparison with European folk-cultures.³ A trained Indologist, Haberlandt was only a few years younger than Heger when he joined the *Hofmuseum* as one of Heger's assistants. His ambitions, however, transcended the indexing of endless amounts of ethnographic objects. Haberlandt found a way of escaping Heger's regime by »inventing« a new academic discipline.⁴ Together with his colleague Wilhelm Hein from the same museum department, in 1894 he founded an academic society named the *Verein für Österreichische Volkskunde*, complete with a pertinent journal and a museum. Their objective was to introduce the populations of the Habsburg monarchy itself as a subject for ethnological research.

In the whole of Europe, *Volkskunde* and folklorist movements were booming since the mid-19th century. The romantic, mainly philological interest in vernacular, oral folklore, underwent change when exposed to modern techniques of public display developed in the big exhibition enterprises of the world fairs, and in the new publications and museums emerging in their wake. Here the cathedrals of modernity met with compensatory tableaux of idealised rural peasant life. While non-European colonial Others were exhibited as primitive evidence for the evolutionary superiority of the metropolitan public, the display of the »Other within«, i.e. the nationally, culturally and racially »own« peasant culture, held the potential for a re-evolutionary primitivism with the promise of healing or soothing the impositions of industrial modernity. The late 19th-century Habsburg Empire gave rise to a large variety of such initiatives. Due to its multinational and multilingual nature, specifically in the provincial centres of the Monarchy, a diverse spectrum of academic institutions, museums, learned societies, and numerous private initiatives were active in this field. Some of these had a more political, some a more aesthetic, others yet a more academic mission.⁵ An overarching approach for an ethnography of the multiethnic empire was sketched out

6 Jöhler, Reinhard: Das Ethnische als Forschungskonzept: Die österreichische Volkskunde im europäischen Vergleich. In: Beitzl, Klaus (Hg.): *Ethnologia Europaea*. Wien: Veröff. des Inst. für Volkskunde der Univ. Wien 1995, pp. 69-101.

7 Nikitsch, Herbert: Auf der Bühne früher Wissenschaft. Aus der Geschichte des *Vereins für Volkskunde* (1894-1945). Wien: Selbstverl. des Vereins für Volkskunde 2006.

8 Gingrich, Andre: Liberalism in Imperial Anthropology: Notes on an Implicit Paradigm in Continental European Anthropology before World War I. In: *Ab Imperio* 1 (2007), pp. 224-239.

9 Appadurai, Arjun: Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery. In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28 (1986), pp. 356-361.

10 Österreichische Adria-Ausstellung. Wien 1913 Mai bis Oktober. Offizieller Katalog, Wien: Elbemühl 1913 (mit einem Plan).

11 Marchetti, Christian: Scientists with Guns. On the Ethnographic Exploration of the Balkans by Austrian-Hungarian Scientists before and during World War I. In: *Ab Imperio* 1 (2007), pp. 165-190.

12 Haberlandt, Arthur: Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Volkskunde von Montenegro, Albanien und Serbien. Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise in den von den k.u.k. Truppen besetzten Gebieten Sommer 1916. Wien: Verein für österreichische Volkskunde 1917.

13 Marchetti, Christian: Wiener Ethnographen im Ersten Weltkrieg. In: *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 86/87 (2007), pp. 241-260.

by the subordinate researchers in the *Hofmuseum's* department. Their object of study was »the real *Volk*« (note the singular), thought to be found underneath superficial national differences. Employing inductive and comparative methods, they aspired to dig into the primitive conditions of life among rural populations. The »colourful« ethnic diversity of the empire was promoted by them as the essence of Europe's own »unity in diversity«. ⁶ These protagonists, and at least a part of their growing support base in the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, were stakeholders in a liberalism supportive of the state. ⁷ Translated into an implicit academic paradigm, this liberalism promoted the conjunctive rather than disjunctive aspects of culture. Although ethnicity was a key concept, it was understood as different from the »political« concept of nationality. ⁸ Yet, »liberal« did not mean egalitarian. Culture was a hierarchical concept and the claim for a leading role for German culture was not questioned. Empathic governance was to capitalize from the cultural diversity of the empire, bringing aesthetic refinement and a kind of »fair trade« through the consideration of traditional economic structures. Unlike the subject populations of other empires of the time, such an approach was facilitated by the fact that the empire's various peoples all were found to belong to a common Indo-Germanic, white race.

Now how did such theory work out in practice? Anthropological theory, at least since the latter part of the 19th century, »has always been based on the practice of going somewhere, preferably somewhere geographically, morally, and socially distant from the theoretical and cultural metropolis of the anthropologist. The science of the other,« writes Appadurai, »has inescapably been tied to the journey elsewhere«. ⁹ In anthropological research conducted in the Habsburg Empire, however, »the journey elsewhere« did not necessarily mean going overseas. While expeditions into faraway lands did play a role in global ethnography or *Völkerkunde*, as represented by Heger and his department, for *Volkskunde* this journey meant the bridging of the gap between urban and rural culture. Representing a liminal region between the two approaches, the Balkans became a key field of research for both.

The Anthropological Society in Vienna, founded in 1860, can be regarded as the nucleus for both *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde* and its respective approaches. Its *Ethnographic Commission* installed in 1884 – not by coincidence only a few years after the Habsburg occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 – sent out a number of expeditions to Bosnia, Herzegovina, and other Balkan territories up to WWI. Even though such enterprises were continuously labeled as »expeditions«, the improvements in infrastructure soon allowed more comfortable ways of travelling in these countries, not unlike regular tourists.

When Michael Haberlandt, and his son and appointed successor Arthur Haberlandt, started to collect ethnographic objects from the Balkans for their museum in Vienna, they generated scientific capital on the region not so much by travelling in the region but by exhibiting it. They were also given responsibility for the curatorship of the ethnographic section of the *Imperial Adriatic Exhibition*, opening its gates in Vienna's Prater in 1913 as the monarchy's penultimate exhibition prior to its downfall – the very last was the *Great War Exhibition*. This exhibition presented the Adriatic seaboard and especially its eastern shores as a kind of frontier space in the Habsburgs' southward expansion. The ethnographic display included objects from a large region stretching from Istria over Dalmatia and Bosnia down to Albania, and these territories' vernacular culture was presented on a declining evolutionary ladder: while in Istria an authentic primitive culture was understood as only to be found in relics, Albania was presented as an open-air museum of archaic life. ¹⁰

When during WWI further Balkan territories came under Habsburg rule, at least for a short period, both Haberlandt and Heger soon took advantage of this situation. ¹¹ The former played an important role in the organisation of a historic-ethnographic expedition into the occupied territories of Montenegro, Northern Albania, and Serbia in the summer of 1916. (One of its members was Haberlandt's son Arthur, who was happy enough to escape the dangerous trench warfare he had experienced as a war volunteer. ¹²) Heger similarly took advantage of the Habsburg occupation of Northern Albania, which gave him the opportunity to explore the tribal area of the Mirditë, the largest Catholic clan in Northern Albania, which he studied for two months in the summer of 1917. ¹³

Heger and Haberlandt were mainly interested in collecting the material culture of the areas through which they travelled, since the exhibition and interpretation of objects was their primary objective. Haberlandt junior brought back about 130 objects, mainly acquired

14 Zeitschrift für österreichische
Volkskunde 23 (1917), p. 132.

15 For a review, cf. Fischel, Hartwig:
Aus dem Wiener Kunstleben: Aus-
stellung zur Volkskunde der besetzten
Balkangebiete. In: Kunst und Kunst-
handwerk 21 (1918), p. 69.

at the *bazaars* of Shkodër, Tirana, Prižren, and Skopje. Heger acquired 68 objects, many of which came directly from the native populations and some from *bazaars*, but he lost a number of these during transport. Back in Vienna, Haberlandt senior was exploiting every possible way to gather more objects from the region, as he and his son were systematically promoting their museum as the future centre for the study and presentation of the Balkan peninsula. Cleverly, the Haberlandts presented an agenda for continued research into the culture and ethnography of the occupied territories that promised the production of knowledge which would be useful in the occupation and later administration of these areas.¹⁴

To increase the amount of objects in his collection, Haberlandt expressed interest in the anthropological-ethnographic collection of the *Hofmuseum*, that is, Heger's own collection. We thus return to the conflict I mentioned at the beginning: Heger had to realize that his own superiors had taken the side of his rivals. Even though his own department's collection was scheduled for rearrangement, he had to sort out 119 objects to be lent to the museum for *Volkskunde*. This he had to do by himself, as his assistants were in the field. When the Haberlandts opened an exhibition themed on the *Volkskunde der besetzten Balkanländer*¹⁵ in the ballroom of the University in Vienna, Heger went to Carlsbad to cure the various diseases he had contracted during his trip to Albania. But the Haberlandts' triumph did not last for long: with the conclusion of WWI only a few months later, a museum dedicated to the *Volkskunde* of the Habsburg domains became a relic of a bygone imperial past. Its regional scope was compromised by a new political order. The institutional division between these two museum institutions, resp. their successors continues today, however; but that is a matter for another paper.

Did Heger lose his in-fight with Haberlandt because he, still suffering from dysentery and malaria, could not put up enough resistance? Did Haberlandt prevail because his society had just recruited Countess Nadine von Berthold, the wife of a former foreign minister, current *Oberstkämmerer*, and therefore Heger's superior, as an honorary member? Whatever the truth may be, it is evident that the complex of public interest, research opportunities, and personal career planning must not be underestimated in the historiography of academic research. Our case demonstrates how these factors had a lasting impact on the shaping of disciplines and institutions. Yet, because the rivalry failed to transcend the debate over borders – a discourse concerning the Balkans' belonging to a European versus non-European disciplinary scope – the result was an emergence of winners and losers, but not better research.

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