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## EARLY MODERN OTTOMAN AND RUSSIAN CLOTHING THROUGH ETHNIC STEREOTYPES IN WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper traces the early modern ethnic ‘stereotypes’ in Western and Central Europe by discussing the various sources of such stereotypes, both textual and visual, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. A useful reference is the well-known – or sometimes infamous – Völkertafel (Table of Nations) from eighteenth-century Styria, which has been fully translated into English here. The writer emphasizes how narrow the gap is between an allegedly accurate, neutral account and one that veers into misrepresentation or stereotype. Whether a depiction is seen as stereotypical often hinges on the viewpoint and interpretation of the observer. Among the various ethnic generalizations explored, even traditional attire was interpreted as being characteristic of specific peoples or nations. The article comparatively examines the stereotypes about Ottoman and Russian clothing. The article claims that the Southeastern and Eastern European nations were grouped together with their according imperial identities, i.e., the Russian and Ottoman Empires. In the early modern era, ethnic identities were shaped along the imperial and state lines.*

*Keywords: national characters, ethnic stereotypes, clothing, Ottoman Empire, Russia*

## L'ABBIGLIAMENTO OTTOMANO E RUSSO NELL'ETÀ MODERNA ATTRAVERSO GLI STEREOTIPI ETNICI IN EUROPA OCCIDENTALE E CENTRALE

### SINTESI

*L'articolo analizza gli ‘stereotipi’ etnici in Europa occidentale e centrale in Età moderna, esaminando le diverse fonti di tali stereotipi, sia testuali che visive, dal sedicesimo al diciottesimo secolo. Un riferimento utile è la nota – o talvolta famigerata – Völkertafel (Tavola delle Nazioni), elaborata nella Stiria del diciottesimo secolo, che è stata completamente tradotta in inglese. L'autore sottolinea quanto sia sottile il confine tra una descrizione apparentemente accurata e neutrale e una che scivola nella distorsione o nello stereotipo.*

*La percezione di una rappresentazione come stereotipata dipende spesso dal punto di vista e dall'interpretazione dell'osservatore. Tra le varie generalizzazioni etniche analizzate, anche l'abito tradizionale veniva interpretato come caratteristico di determinati popoli o nazioni. L'articolo esamina in modo comparativo gli stereotipi sull'abbigliamento ottomano e russo. Si sostiene che le nazioni dell'Europa sud-orientale e orientale venivano raggruppate secondo le rispettive identità imperiali, cioè l'Impero russo e quello ottomano. Nell'età moderna, le identità etniche venivano infatti modellate lungo le linee imperiali e statali.*

*Parole chiave: carattere nazionale, stereotipi etnici, abbigliamento, Impero ottomano, Russia*

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The *Styrian Table of Peoples* or *Völkertafel* is a series of oil paintings created by an anonymous artist from Styria in the eighteenth century. It outlines seventeen characteristics or stereotypes – such as manners, vices, and diseases – attributed to different nations, which contribute to shaping collective identities both within and beyond these communities (Stanzel, 1998, 13–36, 44–54). While the author was likely a subject of the Habsburg Empire, no nation was spared harsh judgment, including the Spaniards and Germans (Stanzel, 1999, 23–24; Kopelew, 1985, 28; Janžekovič, 2021–2022; 2024). However, as the nations are arranged from Western to Eastern Europe, the positive attributes gradually decrease as one moves eastward. Although Styria lay close to the border regions of the Ottoman Empire for almost 200 years, at the junction of Central and Southeastern Europe, and the Habsburgs maintained diplomatic relations with the Ottomans, the *Völkertafel* still reflects the common Western and Central European stereotypes of them. In this article, I present an English translation of the *Völkertafel* and

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demonstrate that the ethnic stereotypes of Ottoman and Russian clothing depicted in it were derived from widely circulated sources of the period, rather than from any specific knowledge of their fashions.

Quintilian's phrase *vestis virum facit* (Erasmus, 1520, 212) made us understand that 'clothes make the man'. Yet, the question arises: do clothes shape peoples and nations? While it is noted in Charlemagne's biography (Einhard, 1880, XXIII) that he donned the 'national, or Frankish, dress', the formal recognition of national costumes as a public policy did not occur until much later. Wagner observed that in the late eighteenth century, Gustav III of Sweden became the first European monarch to formally advocate for clothing that aligned with his nation's image, climate, and economy, rejecting the more lavish French fashion of the time (Alm, 2016; Wagner, 2018). As Maxwell noted, the political language of the revolutionary era was intricately intertwined with the language of fashion. Across Europe, patriots strove to establish a 'national uniform' by means of 'sartorial nationalization' (Maxwell, 2014; 2021). While these efforts were grounded in economic and practical concerns, they also aimed to symbolically affirm the distinct cultural image.

Clothing has always been influenced by geography and climate, as it must adapt to environmental elements such as precipitation, wind, rough surfaces, and varying temperatures. Yet, anthropologists emphasize that clothing has long been viewed as a crucial indicator of social and individual identities. Roland Barthes argued that clothing represents a structure of collective forms and norms, blending aesthetics with ethics. He proposed that clothing is defined by the normative connections that regulate, allow, and control what people wear according to their historical and social contexts. Barthes contended that clothing systems could be regional or international, but not truly national (Barthes, 1957; 2013). However, Europeans in the early modern era would challenge Barthes' assertion, as they recognized 'national costumes'. For these Europeans, among other defining characteristics, the defining feature of Russian attire was fur or *kaftan*, while Ottoman clothing was closely associated with turbans.

Although both the Ottoman and Russian Empires were powerful, their perceived 'barbaric nature' in the eyes of the Western and Central European observers relegated them to marginal roles within the mental and symbolic framework of 'civilized' diplomacy of the time. Abraham de Wicqufort described the Turks as 'cruel, insolent, and proud', while he characterized the Muscovites as 'rude, barbarous, and brutish' (Wicqufort, 1716, 145). Similarly, Hotman observed that 'it is true that the Muscovites are not simply subjects, but slaves unto their Princes' (Hotman, 1603, n.p.). Additionally, Louis XIV was frequently referred to as the 'Turk' in a derogatory manner, reflecting how his expansive politics were perceived as a threat to the European international order (Piirimäe, 2007, 75–76; Janžeković, 2019; 2020–2021; 2022; 2024–2025). This rhetorical strategy was commonly used to denounce any adversary who was seen as violating the European international order.

In this study, I have utilized and analyzed a variety of sources, including paintings and prints. These textual and visual sources are just a few examples of different places where one can detect early modern ethnic stereotypes. These sources, which

were often used to amuse or entertain their various audiences, are representative of the broader trend and interpretation of the Western and Central Europeans about the Ottoman and Russian clothing. Even the hand-written wanted notes from the eighteenth century contain phrases about the national attire, such as the criminals wearing the ‘Polish cap’, ‘Hungarian trousers’ and ‘German shoes’ (Sander-Faes, 2025, 126–127, 148–149). This article is not intended as an exhaustive exploration of all early modern ethnic clichés but rather a focused investigation of specific widely disseminated sources related to a particular topic. Some sources, specifically focusing on various dresses, such as various costume books by Cesare Vecellio (1590; 1598) and Claes Rålamb (1600), demonstrate a sophisticated knowledge of the wide variety of clothing within specific states. Some diplomats, such as Sigismund von Herberstein (1486–1566), also sometimes wore and depicted the local clothing (Fig. 1). Moreover, some of the sources I examined, such as maps and playing cards, have rarely been considered in the study of clothing stereotypes.

Both the early modern Ottoman and Russian states were multi-national empires (İnalcık & Quataert, 1994; Kappeler, 1992; Lieven, 2000; Howard, 2017; Suny & Kivelson, 2017). In these empires, ethnic identities often overlapped and intertwined, meaning that one identity did not necessarily negate the other.<sup>2</sup> But, what is particularly noteworthy is the relative absence of specific references to the various Eastern and Southeastern European peoples, who would later form the distinct national identities of Albanians, Belarusians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Macedonians, Moldovans, Montenegrins, Romanians, Serbs, and Ukrainians.<sup>3</sup> These groups, still in the process of ‘forming’ or ‘inventing’ their national identities,<sup>4</sup> were often grouped together under a broader imperial identity. Much like today, it was typically the state or empire that defined ethnic identities. As I demonstrate in this article<sup>5</sup>, the Southeastern European populations living within ‘Turkey’ were frequently referred to as ‘European Turks’ or ‘Greeks’.

2 For a critical view on the often ambiguous concept of identity cf. Brubaker & Cooper (2000).

3 Among others, the research on these nations and beyond has been done by Bagnovskaya (2015), Jurić Pahor (2015), Makuc (2015), Darovec (2021), Casals (2021), Dworski (2023), Vojićić-Komatina & Simović (2025).

4 Many groundbreaking historiographical works in recent decades have focused on nationalism. To counter the (primordialist) historiographies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the modernist approach argues that nations are a modern phenomenon. The key works were written by Hroch (1968), Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983), and Gellner (1983). The middle ground or the ethnosymbolist approach is defended by Smith (1986), Hutchinson (1987), and Armstrong (1982). The field has immensely expanded in the recent years with numerous books, edited volumes, and even specialist academic journals, such as *Nations and Nationalism, Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism, National Identities*, etc.

5 The present original scientific article is an upgrade of the article I wrote for *History and Anthropology* (2022). While both articles thematically focus on the study of ethnic stereotypes, the newer contribution is more comprehensive, historiographically updated, methodologically refined, and brings more original insights. It does not address stereotypes solely through the Völkertafel, but connects them with a wider range of sources, such as wanted notes, in which national origin is expressed through clothing, which is not the case in the older article. The present article is also methodologically completely different, as it is not based on Bloch’s concept of ‘l’histoire régressive,’ i.e. reading history backwards.



Fig. 1: Sigismund Herberstein donning the ceremonial clothes given to him by the Holy Roman Emperor, Russian Grand Duke and Turkish Sultan, respectively (Herberstein, 1560).

### Ethnic ‘Stereotypes’ in the Early Modern Period

Although the term used in the title is somewhat anachronistic – since ‘stereotype’ in its present-day sense did not yet exist – Bloch had already argued that it is the historian’s task to craft narratives for a contemporary audience. He maintained that ‘it is always by borrowing from our daily experiences and by shading them, where necessary, with new tints that we derive the elements which help us to restore the past’ (Bloch, 1954, 44; 1967). The term stereotype was notably absent from Samuel Johnson’s renowned *Dictionary of the English Language* (Johnson, 1755), as well as from the even more widely known French *Encyclopédie* (Diderot, 1751–1772). It was only in the late eighteenth century that the word stereotype emerged, gaining broader use throughout the nineteenth century. At that time, it referred to ‘a fixed metal type; hence, a plate of fixed or solid metallic types for printing books’ and ‘the art of making plates of fixed metallic types’ (Webster, 1828, s.v. ‘stereotype’). This was a technical term from the printing industry, denoting a duplicate plate used in place of the original. It was not until Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922) that the word was first applied in the sociological context we recognize today.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term stereotype is today defined as ‘something continued or constantly repeated without change’ and as ‘a preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person’ (OED, s.v. ‘stereotype’). At the heart of stereotyping lie repetition and the (over)simplification of real-world complexity. While often described as ‘bad, false images’, stereotypes are

also considered ‘at a minimum, a necessary evil’, since without them we would ‘not make sense of or recognize objects or other people’ and would struggle to ‘distinguish one thing from another’ (Mitchell, 2005, 296). Although related, stereotypes should not be conflated with prejudices. The former are generalized assumptions connected to cognitive processing, whereas the latter involve affective responses or attitudes rooted in the emotional aspects of the mind (American Psychological Association, 2006). Thus, the primary distinction between prejudice and stereotype lies in their emotional component.

Whether accurate or not, statements can still qualify as stereotypes. For instance, describing Antarctica as a frigid continent blanketed in ice and snow is a stereotype – one that, aside from rare exceptions such as the McMurdo Dry Valleys, happens to be largely true. Similarly, stereotypes are not required to carry either a negative or positive tone to be considered as such. As a result, they can align with broader notions like patterns, archetypes, or templates. Stereotyping frequently plays a key role in how individuals and groups construct their identities. It occurs along a range of dimensions – including age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, profession, and others. The process of drawing a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, by assigning supposedly ‘unique’ traits, serves as a mechanism for social cohesion (Bernasconi, 2010, 11–13). In this framework, representations based on ethnicity and nationality attracted particular focus during the early modern period.

In his well-known essay *Of National Characters*, David Hume acknowledged the reductive quality of such stereotypes. He observed that ‘Men of Sense condemn these undistinguish’d Judgments’, while also recognizing that certain traits ‘are more frequently to be met with among one People than among their Neighbours’ (Hume, 1748, 267). Hume examined various explanations for national differences, categorizing them broadly into physical and moral factors. In contrast to his peer Montesquieu, Hume argued that geography and climate exert only a minor influence on national character. For him, the ‘Sympathy or Contagion of Manners’ shared among individuals in a community plays a central role in forming such generalizations, as ‘the human Mind is of a very imitative Nature’ (Hume, 1748, 273–275).

Religion also held a significant role, as Orthodox Christianity and Islam were frequently not regarded as ‘European’ by most Western and Central Europeans, and this perception contributed in part to the marginalization of those regions. In early modern Europe, wearing specific clothing could serve as a visible expression of religious affiliation. A telling example appears in Spanish Inquisition records, where in 1670 the former captive Don Andres de Villaro gave testimony that the accused renegade Gaspar de los Reyes ‘was dressed as a Moor above the waist and below it seems like a Christian’ (*vestido el medio cuerpo arriba como moro y de ay abajo le parecio que como cristiano*) (Inquisición, 1670, Exp. 14). The phrase ‘Christian garment below’ likely referred to tight-fitting trousers, whereas being ‘dressed as a Moor above the waist’ suggested the presence of a ‘red bonnet’ (*un bonete colorado*) (Inquisición, 1670, Exp. 14). As the Bennassars demonstrated, the Inquisitors fixated on whether someone appeared to be clothed as a ‘Moor’ or a ‘Christian’, with attire

often serving as the initial piece of testimony presented by witnesses (Bennassar & Bennassar, 1989, 389–394). Such outward markers of identity were taken seriously and discussed in early modern writings.

In this paper, drawing on the insights of (post)colonial scholarship, I examine clichés, both visual and textual, as they are analyzed within the framework of imagology. Imagology, part of literary studies and comparative literature, emphasizes the importance of how certain patterns in literature are perceived or received, rather than solely focusing on the (re)production of them (Stanzel, 1974). As Hugo Dyserinck and Joep Leerssen, editors of the Brill *Studia Imagologica* series, explain, imagology deals with ‘the study of cross-national perceptions and images as expressed in literary discourse’. This field examines the collective representations that an ethnic group creates – more frequently about other groups than itself – often emphasizing distinct perceived traits (Dyserinck, 2014; 1966). Throughout European history, there has been a persistent interest in identifying ethnic and national characteristics through visual representation and folklore (Mlakar, 2022; 2023). A notable example of how ethnic stereotypes circulated widely can be found in educational or instructional prints (Fig. 2).

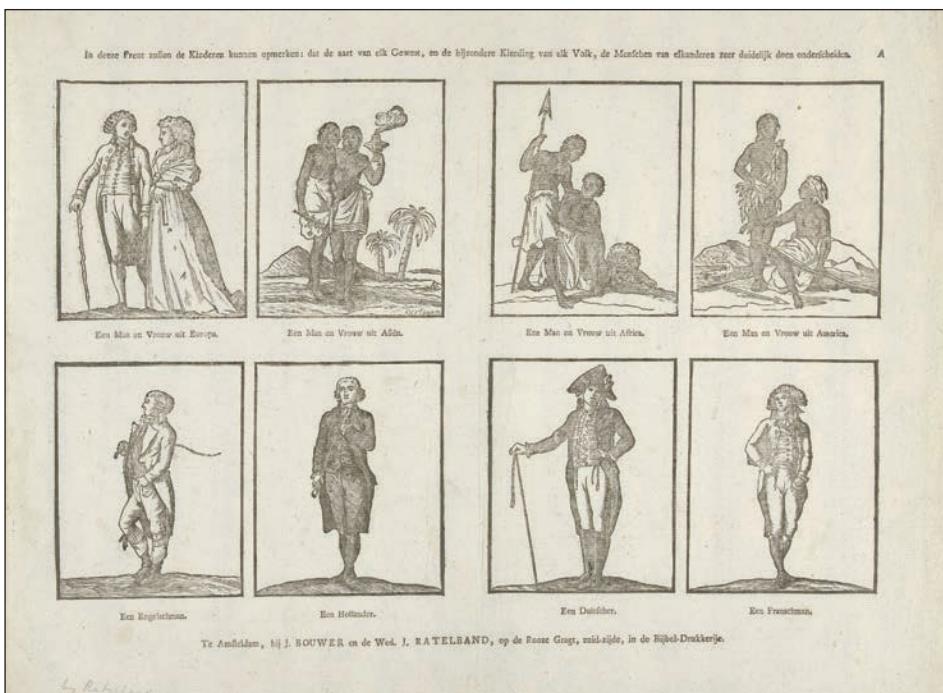


Fig. 2: Gerrit Oortman, *A Print Where Children Can Notice the Characteristic [features] of Each Region and the Peculiar Clothing of Each Nation to Distinguish the People from Each Other* (Oortman, Meyer, 1962, 273).

Over time, both the definitions of images and the aims and foundations of imagology have undergone change. Initially, the discipline was based on the assumption that national characters genuinely existed, and its objective was to recover authentic, essential images while identifying false representations or illusions. Yet, the field quickly progressed, and the foundational belief in national characters or ‘true’ depictions as opposed to deceptive ones was soon questioned and critiqued (Dyserinck, 1966). Karl U. Syndram maintained that every image is a form of fiction – constructed patterns shaped by the author(s) – and therefore, imagology should place its emphasis on discourse (Syndram, 1991, 183–184; for the development of the discipline, cf. Beller & Leerssen, 2007, 3–75). As a result, cultural variation has increasingly been examined through the lens of perception rather than through notions of inherent essence.

Europeans crafted and disseminated these clichés in their own perspectives, presenting them to their audience. It is noteworthy that sources often show inconsistencies in categorizing the Russian and Ottoman Empires, at times identifying them as European and at other times as Asian. This is not unusual or incorrect, as both empires spanned across both continents. The Ottomans and Russians were located on the periphery of Europe and were viewed as ‘Other(s)’ in Central and Western Europe at the time (Hartley, 1992). Thus, the Latin Christendom, i.e. the Europeans in Central and Western Europe, who created or, more accurately, reproduced such images, typically did not rely on either Ottoman or Russian categories and sources, as they did not see them belonging to the European commonwealth.

This paper centers on early modern European *etic* representations of Russians and Ottomans, particularly in relation to their traditional clothing. In anthropological terms, *emic* and *etic* denote two distinct research perspectives: *emic* refers to interpretations from inside the social group being studied, while *etic* refers to viewpoints from an external observer. It is important to emphasize that these are theoretical constructs, and drawing a clear boundary between them is not entirely feasible. The corresponding comparative terms are auto-stereotypes, or internal self-conceptions, and hetero-stereotypes, meaning externally imposed images. Typically, the latter tend to exhibit more stereotypical traits than the former (cf. Hume, 1758). In addition, auto-stereotypes are often more favorable.

### **Omnium gentium mores, leges et ritus**

The early modern period saw a huge proliferation of various collections and anthologies (Blair, 1992; Knight, 2013; Moss, 1996, 139), with Jennifer Richards asserting that collections were the ‘most basic building block’ of Renaissance prose (Richards, 2013, 44). The Spanish and Portuguese discovery reports played a significant role in the establishment of ethnographic writing during the Renaissance. But many Renaissance authors did not travel themselves but rather reused stereotypes drawn from previous sources (Bolgar, 1973, 272; Hodgen, 1964, 116). Johann Boemus (1520), a German humanist (ca. 1485–1535), exemplifies this

practice, compiling one of the first ethnographic collections. Other ‘ethnographers’ such as Jean Bodin, Sebastian Münster, and John Barclay subsequently copied from him (Hodgen, 1953).

In his work, Boemus sometimes provided more detailed and sometimes less specific descriptions of the clothing of various peoples. When it came to the Russians, he claimed that their clothing (*Vestitus Russanorum*) was uniform across the entire ‘nation’, with no significant distinction between the common people and the nobility in terms of dress. He further asserted that their clothing was ‘of all colours saving black’. According to Boemus, the Russians accessorized their garments, noting that ‘this garment they trimme and garnish rounde about the necke with gold and redde silke, it is wide and loose and but little different from those which the Grecians weare: the like also is worne by the Turkes and all the Northerne people... with Otters skinne’ (Boemus, 1610, 217–18). This description reflects a broader ethnic stereotype often applied to distant peoples: the assumption that populations in Russia, the Balkans, and the Ottoman Empire shared similar clothing styles, further reinforcing a generalized view of these diverse groups.

In Boemus’ work, ‘Turkey’ was discussed in the second book dedicated to Asia, while Russia was covered in the third book on Europe. When it came to the ‘clothes of the Turks’ (*Vestimenta Turcarum*), Boemus provided far less detail compared to his description of Russian attire. He noted that ‘both men and women weare long and large garments, made open with a slit before, that they may the better cover, and bend themselves when they purge their bodies of their natural excrementes, in doing whereof, they bee very precise that they turne not their faces towards the Sunne rysing, which way they doe turne themselves when they pray’ (Boemus, 1610, 143–44). Early modern Ottoman men commonly wore long, loose robes (such as the *kaftan* or *entari*) that often had front openings or overlapping panels. While these openings were primarily for comfort, ventilation, and ease of dressing, their design also made it easier to squat or bend when using the toilet, which in the Ottoman world often meant squat-style latrines. This was a practical benefit rather than the main purpose of the garment’s construction. Boemus most likely employed this explanation for its entertainment value.

This unusual account links clothing to bodily functions, making it one of the few descriptions that connects attire with the excretion of bodily fluids. It is also notable that Boemus mentioned both men and women wearing similar garments, which, from a European perspective, suggests a stereotype of gender fluidity or indifference regarding Ottoman clothing. This perception of similarity in dress between genders in the Ottoman Empire has persisted as a longstanding stereotype. In the early modern Ottoman Empire, men’s and women’s clothing followed the same general layered-robés tradition but differed in cut, ornamentation, fabrics, and accessories. Men typically wore garments like the *kaftan*, *jubba*, and *şalvar* (trousers), often in restrained colors and patterns that reflected rank and occupation. Women’s clothing included similar base garments but tended to feature brighter colors, more elaborate embroidery, and decorative accessories such as jeweled belts.

and ornate headscarves (Scarce, 1988; Quataert, 1997). Social status, region, and religion also influenced these differences, but gender distinctions in style, tailoring, and adornment were clear.

Moreover, in the early modern period, both Poles and Hungarians – especially the nobility and military elites – adopted elements of Ottoman dress. This was most visible in frontier regions where sustained contact through trade, warfare, and diplomacy blurred cultural boundaries. In Poland–Lithuania, styles such as the *żupan* (a long robe), *kontusz* (an overcoat with split sleeves), and *pas kontuszowy* (ornamental sash) were influenced by Ottoman and broader Eastern fashions, though adapted to local tastes. In Hungary, particularly among the Magyar nobility, garments like the *dolmány* (fitted jacket) and *mente* (fur-lined coat) reflected Ottoman tailoring, fabrics, and decorative motifs (Jasienski, 2014). These styles became markers of elite status and, over time, were reinterpreted as symbols of national identity rather than foreign import. These adoptions were part of the wider trend of *Turkomania*.

### **Evropa recens descripta and Asia noviter delineata**

Stereotypes can also be explored through maps that depicted various peoples and cultural details, often enhancing popular stereotypes with simplistic and amusing depictions of various ethnicities. One such example is the Dutchman Willem Janszoon Blaeu's famous map *Evropa recens descripta*, published in 1635. This map depicts nine European capitals on the top and ten pairs of nations on both sides, each depicted in national costumes (Fig. 3). Notably, while there were no direct depictions of 'Turks' on the map, a couple of Greeks in the bottom right corner are shown wearing a turban and a hijab. The depiction of Constantinople further suggests that these 'Greeks' were intended to represent the 'European Turks'. These visual representations reflect how the Ottoman Empire's influence was symbolically intertwined with the image of 'Turkish' or 'Ottoman' dress across centuries.

Blaeu's map of Europe is significant not only for what it includes but also for what it omits, as the absence of certain peoples can be just as revealing as their presence. Notably, the lack of explicit references to the Ottomans and Russians on this map reflects their marginal position in the Western and Central European worldview, although especially the Ottoman threat was quite tangible at least until the late seventeenth century. Russia, for example, was shown on a different map, *Asia noviter delineata*, where the Russian couple is depicted wearing fur clothes on the right (Fig. 4). Similarly, the 'Turks' were missing here, although some of the 'subjected' peoples of the Ottomans, such as the Armenians, Arabs, Tartars, and Syrians were included. This omission supports the view that Blaeu equated the 'European Turks' with 'Greeks', further highlighting how these two groups were often portrayed as symbols of the broader Ottoman Empire in European cartography. Blaeu also created more region-specific maps, including those of Anatolia and Russia, where he depicted the costumes of people living in the Ottoman Empire with greater nuance, providing a more detailed representation of the diverse cultures within the empire.



Fig. 3: Willem Janszoon Blaeu, *Europa recens descripta* (Wikimedia Commons).

The Russians and Ottomans were often viewed as closely related in early modern ethnic stereotypes, with various sources linking them through shared characteristics. George Turberville, who went on a diplomatic mission to Moscow in 1568–69, wrote in a poem that Russian ‘maners are so Turkylke, the men so full of guile’ (Cross, 1985, 4), reflecting a common European perception of both groups as similar in behavior and culture. This perspective on the ethnogenesis of the Russians and Ottomans is particularly revealing. Zedler, in his *Universal-Lexicon*, also recognized the Russians as part of the ‘mighty Scythian nation’, further suggesting a connection between the Russians and the Ottomans. Zedler even stated that the ‘large and powerful people’ of the ‘Turks’ in Asia ‘sprang from the European Scythians’ (Zedler, 1742, XXXII, 1899; XLV, 1629), reinforcing the idea that the two groups shared a common ancestral origin in the ancient Scythians, who were by then considered part of the European world. This link highlights how the Russians and Ottomans were often viewed as part of a shared cultural and ethnic heritage in early modern European thought.



Fig. 4: Willem Janszoon Blaeu, *Asia noviter delineata* (Wikimedia Commons).

## Geographie

In early modern Europe, playing cards were not just a form of leisure but were also used as educational tools. Although such sources were ostensibly used for education, they also included widespread and simplistic casual stereotypes, intended to amuse and entertain its audience. A variety of themed playing cards were produced, depicting fortifications, occupations and animals, among other things (Parlett, 1990; 1992). One notable example is the *Geographie*, a set of educational playing cards created for Louis XIV at the request of Cardinal Mazarin. *Geographie* was one of four sets of educational playing cards designed to teach young Louis about different subjects; the other three focused on fables, French kings, and renowned queens. These cards were published many times throughout the early modern period (Desmarests & Bella, 1644; 1698).

The *Geographie* deck consisted of fifty-two cards divided into four suits, each representing a continent: Africa, Europe, America and Asia (O'Donoghue, 1901, 115–116). Instead of the traditional suits of clubs, spades, diamonds and hearts, the suits were symbolized by the continents, with each suit's King

personifying the continent. Interestingly, the King was depicted as a woman, a common artistic convention used to represent geographical entities. The Ace through Jack and Queen depicted female figures representing individual countries within each continent. The court figures were often shown riding horseback or exotic animals, with Asia represented by elephants and the Americas by mammoth armadillos. These exotic depictions of animals and peoples served to highlight the ‘exotic Other’ while subtly reinforcing the idea of a non-exotic, familiar Europe (Bleichmar, 2021).

Each card in the deck bore a brief descriptive paragraph (Fig. 5). For example, Europe was described as ‘the first part of the world, for its fertility, and for value, civility, science, fame, and wealth of its peoples, and for being the seat of Christendom. It is situated in the north, in the cold zone and temperate’. These descriptions emphasized Europe’s centrality and superiority in the early modern worldview, positioning it as the epitome of civilization and importance in the global hierarchy.



Fig. 5: Playing cards for ‘Muscovy’ and ‘Turkey’ (Desmarests & Bella, 1644).

In the *Geographie* deck, the figure representing ‘Muscovy’ was assigned to the Ace of Asia. The accompanying description noted that ‘the majority of the cold and marshy lands are in Asia, the rest in Europe’, with Moscow, the capital, being located in Europe. This illustrates the geographical ambiguity surrounding the Russian Empire, which spanned both Europe and Asia, often leading to its inclusion in either or both continents depending on the perspective. Muscovy was depicted as a woman standing with a spear on her shoulder and holding a shield in her right hand. Notably, she wore a turban or similar headwear, a detail that aligned her visually with ‘Turkey’ and other Asian nations. This imagery reinforced the stereotype that linked Russia with the Ottoman Empire, suggesting a common Eastern, exotic image.

The figure for ‘Turkey’ was the Queen (Dame) of Asia, depicted as a warrior woman mounted on horseback, holding a drawn sabre, and wearing a turban. The description for Turkey, unlike that for Muscovy, did not focus on clothing stereotypes but instead presented geographical facts, mentioning various regions and rivers. The absence of clothing details in Turkey’s description contrasts with the more stylized representation of Muscovy, reflecting the early modern European tendency to emphasize the exotic and martial aspects of Eastern and peripheral cultures, while occasionally omitting specific cultural details.

### Steirische Völkertafel

The *Styrian Table of Peoples* or *Völkertafel* lists ten or eleven European nations in a west-to-east axis. This work was based on Joseph Friedrich Leopold’s engraving (*Leopold-Stich*), produced around 1720 in Augsburg. The inspiration for these tables were ethnographers and their compilations of findings, often found in encyclopedias and lexicons such as those by Berckenmeyer (1720) and Zedler (1731–1754). Both the *Leopold-Stich* and the *Völkertafel* contain nearly identical texts, although with differing depictions and dialects.

The last nation was labeled ‘Turk or Greek’ (Fig. 6). This dual naming could be interpreted in two ways: either as a reflection of the belief that the Turks and Greeks shared identical characteristics, being viewed as one entity within Europe, or as an acknowledgment that they were considered two separate nations. As I demonstrate, the ‘Greeks’ were often regarded as European peoples within the Ottoman Empire and were frequently referred to as ‘European Turks’ in contemporary sources. This blending of ethnic and imperial identities from outside the European core was a common practice in early modern representations.

The key point to comprehend, which many scholars overlook or ignore, is that these tables were primarily meant as forms of entertainment. This is evident in the use of various rhetorical devices commonly found in contemporaneous texts, such as superlatives, comparatives, climax or gradation, comic triples, contrast and dysphemism. These rhetorical figures were well-known in contemporary manuals



Fig. 6: Styrian Table of Peoples (Steirische Völkertafel) from the eighteenth century. The peoples of Eastern and Southeastern Europe are different from the representatives from Western and Central Europe. Even the shading is darker behind the representatives of Eastern Europe.

on humor (Schüttelpelz, 1998). The *Styrian Table of Peoples*, for example, can be read both vertically and horizontally, yet only in a comparative manner.

A clear example of comic triple, gradation and dysphemism is the description of intellect: the Pole is described as ‘inattentive’, the Hungarian ‘even less [attentive]’, and the Russian as ‘not [attentive] at all’. The Table is also rich with binary oppositions, such as in the case of manners, where the Italian is described as ‘devious’, while the German is ‘open-hearted’. These types of groupings, comparisons and rankings of national characters were not only popular but often rooted in irony. The title of one such national revue explicitly states the intent of these works, as they were published ‘because of curiosity and amusement’ (*curiositatis et oblectationis gratia*) (Engelbrecht, 1730; Stanzel, 1999, 17–22; Mezeg & Žigon, 2023).

Of particular interest in this context is the line dedicated to clothing (*Tracht der Klaidung*). The term *Tracht* referred to something fixed and stable, contrasting with the more transient fashion styles of the time. In the eighteenth century, this term encompassed not only clothes but also hats, shoes, wigs, hairstyles, facial hair, jewelry, canes and swords (Stanzel, 1999, 56–57; 1995). *Tracht* was a way of encapsulating traditional attire, often seen as a reflection of their identities and cultural values.

The textual descriptions of the clothing in the *Styrian Table of Nations* do not offer detailed information about the styles, fabrics and patterns of the attire. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the national characters and how these are reflected in the perceived qualities of their clothing. For example, the Spaniard's national costume is described as 'respectable', which correlates with the Spaniard being characterized as 'proud' and 'manly' in manners and physical traits. Similarly, the Frenchman is described as wearing 'unstable' clothes, which aligns with his perceived 'recklessness' and 'childishness'.

This approach demonstrates the doctrine of analogy or correspondence, a common framework in cultural, philosophical and intellectual thought during the period (Faivre, 1994). According to this doctrine, there is a direct correlation between a person's character, their behavior, and their outward appearance, including their clothing. The Englishman is said to follow 'the French style', implying a degree of mimicry or influence, while the Swede's leather attire symbolizes strength and durability. This alignment of character traits with clothing, as seen in the descriptions, underscores how early modern European thinking linked visible aspects of perception – such as dress – to deeper, often stereotypical understandings of ethnic image and personal virtues or vices.

The depiction of the 'Russian' or 'Muscovite' (*Muskawith*) in the *Styrian Table of Nations* illustrates a stereotypical image that contrasts with the more modern portrayal of Russia during Tsar Peter the Great's reign. The figure wears winter fur shoes (such as *валенки*, traditional felt boots), a fur coat, a fur hat and a long beard, but notably lacks a sword or sabre, which reinforces an image of the Russian as more rustic or traditional rather than embracing the Europeanized fashion introduced by Peter the Great.

Although Peter passed a law in 1701 requiring Russian urban society to adopt European clothing styles, this law had minimal impact on the broader population, especially for peasants. The clothing described in the table represents an older, pre-Petrine Russian imagery – associated with the Muscovy period and the more traditional Orthodox image, rather than the Europeanized court of Peter the Great. Peter had already begun to influence the adoption of Western European styles at his court, and these changes were gradually spreading to urban centers, yet the depiction here clings to older stereotypes. The choice of this particular stereotype reflects how perceptions of Russia in Central and Western Europe were often resistant to change and how such stereotypes were tied to deeply ingrained notions of Russianness, which were slow to adapt to contemporary shifts.

Table 1. A Brief Description of the Peoples in Europe and Their Characteristics.

By names	Spaniard	Frenchman	Vach [Italian]	German	Englishman	Swede	Pole	Hungarian	Muscovite [Russian]	Turk or Greek
By manners	proud	reckless	devious	open-hearted	well-raised	hard and robust	boorish	disloyal	malicious	like April weather
By character and characteristics	gracious and chatty	jealous	quite well	amiable	cruel	even more wild	the crudest	truly Hungarian	a lying devil	
By intellect	smart and wise	cautious	perceptive	witty	charming	hardened	inattentive	even less (attentive)	not (attentive)	without
By their physical characteristics	manly	childish	as anyone wants	all over	effeminate	inscrutable	mediocre	bloodthirsty	infinitely rude	tender
By erudition in Scripture	learned in	in warfare	in canon law	in civil law	world-smart	in liberal arts	in diverse languages	in Latin language	in Greek language	false politics
By the traditional costume	respectable	unstable	honourable	initiates	in the French style	from leather	long coat	multi-coloured	out of fur	in a feminine way
By vices	arrogant	fratulant	lascivious	wasteful	restless	superstitious	boasting	treacherous	quite treacherous	even more treacherous
They love honour and fame	war	gold	drink	lust	delicious foods	nobility	revolt	beating	self-love	
Diseases	constipation	his own	wicked plague	gout	tuberculosis	dropsey	Polish plait	epilepsy	cough	weakness
Their land	fertile	well-cultivated	delightful and pleasant	good	fertile	mountainous	forested	rich in fruit and gold	full of ice	sweet
By the virtues of war	courageous	cunning	cautious	invincible	a sea hero	undaunted	impetuous	seditious	arduous	really lazy
By worship	the best of all	good	a little better	even more devout	ickle as the moon	eager in faith	believes all sorts	intemperate	apostate	just the same
They recognize a monarch as their lord	a king	a patriarch	an emperor	first one, then another	free reign	an elected (monarch)	an unpopular (monarch)	a voluntary (monarch)	a tyrant	
They have an abundance of	fruits	goods	wine	grain	pastures	mines	fur	everything	bees	delicate and soft things
They spend their free time	playing	cheating	chatting	drinking	working	eating	quarreling	relaxing	sleeping	ailing
Comparison with their animal	an elephant	a fox	a lynx	a lion	a horse	an ox	a bear	a wolf	an ass	a cat
Their lives end in bed	in war	in monastery	in wine	in water	on earth	in barn	under sabre	in snow	in fraud	

The depiction of the ‘Turk or Greek’ in the *Styrian Table of Nations* as wearing clothing ‘in a womanly way’ (*auf Weiber Art*; Table 1) illustrates a longstanding stereotype that portrays Ottoman men as effeminate due to their attire. This stereotype is rooted in the early modern European perception of gender and clothing differences, despite the fact that Ottoman borders were very close to Styria for most of the early modern period. In Western and Central Europe, gendered distinctions in clothing were clear: skirts for women and pants for men. The Ottoman Empire, however, had a more fluid approach to attire. Both men and women wore the *salvar* (baggy trousers gathered at the ankle), which were seen as unusual or feminine by European standards. This led to the perception that Ottoman men were dressed similarly to women, perpetuating the idea of effeminate or gender-neutral clothing.

In addition to the *salvar*, another key element in the stereotype was the turban, which was strongly associated with ‘Turkish’ image in Europe. The turban was a distinctive part of Ottoman male dress, yet it is important to note that Muslim women typically did not wear turbans, which further complicates the stereotype. Despite this, early modern European depictions often conflated the ‘Turk’ with all Muslim peoples and portrayed them as wearing turbans, regardless of gender. The ‘Greek’ figures were also often depicted as wearing turbans, even though most Greeks were Orthodox Christians and not Muslims. The association of the Greeks with the ‘Turk’ in terms of clothing reflects the Ottoman Empire’s dominance in the region and its cultural influence on its Christian subjects, furthering the stereotype of the ‘Greek’ as a part of the Ottoman ‘Other’ despite their distinct religious identities.

## CONCLUSION

This article analyzed the almost evergreen ethnic stereotypes regarding Ottoman and Russian clothes as they were defined by Europeans in the early modern era in both image and text. Europeans and people in general often believe(d) that they knew distant cultures even before encountering them. These ethnic stereotypes were not inherent traits, but rather cultural constructs shaped by ethnographical, political, and historical reflections during interactions with the Other. They were reinforced through various channels, such as education, books, the press, and diplomacy. Many thinkers of the early modern period maintained commonplace books that catalogued stereotypes about different peoples and nations.

By emphasizing the diverse types of sources and media that address Ottoman and Russian costumes, I have demonstrated how deeply ingrained these stereotypes were and how they permeated both literate and illiterate audiences. Likewise, ethnic stereotypes were built upon earlier literary conventions about particular groups. I purposefully incorporated sources from various traditions, regions and languages, to highlight the broad nature of such images across Europe.

In early modern times, clothing served as both a signifier and a means of reinforcing social identities across generations. The Russians and Ottomans, like other cultures, were often subjected to orientalist depictions. Despite changes in fashion and style over time and across social classes, the core stereotypes about them remained relatively constant. From the early sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, clothing associated with the Russians and Ottomans highlighted the same key features: fur for the Russians and turbans for the Ottomans. Examining emic sources would provide an interesting approach, focusing on the role of clothing in nation-building and how these ‘stereotypical sources’ contributed to the creation or reinforcement of national image.

The cases of Russia and the Ottoman Empire are particularly intriguing because, while they were significant, they were also considered peripheral to Europe. The distinction between the ‘Greeks’, referring to Southeastern European peoples, and the ‘Turks’ is a peculiar one. Ethnic or national identity in a multi-ethnic empire was a complex issue, with allegiances often shifting between national and state affiliations. Subjugated or non-sovereign peoples were often less regarded than the sovereign rulers and their military forces. Especially with the rise of nationalism, ethnic identities came into conflict with state or imperial identities. The question of whether the Ottoman Empire and Russia were considered part of Europe depends on the specific sources. Much like today, the placement of Turkey and Russia in European mental maps was fluid and unstable.

## ZGODNJENOVOVEŠKA OSMANSKA IN RUSKA OBLAČILA SKOZI ETNIČNE STEREOTIPE V ZAHODNJI IN SREDNJI EVROPI

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### POVZETEK

Ta članek analizira tekstualne in vizualne etnične stereotipe o osmanskih in ruskih oblačilih, kot so jih Evropejci v zahodni in srednji Evropi uporabljali v zgodnjem novem veku. Evropejci oziroma ljudje na splošno so pogosto mislili, da podrobno poznajo oddaljene kulture, še preden so se z njimi srečali ali jih videli. Ti etnični stereotipi so bili kulturni konstrukt, ki so jih oblikovali etnografski, politični in zgodovinski premisleki med soočenjem z Drugim. S poudarjanjem različnih vrst virov in medijev, ki obravnavajo otomanske in ruske »nacionalne noše«, avtor pokaže, kako globoko so bili ti stereotipi zakoreninjeni in kako so prežemali tako pismeno kot nepismeno občinstvo. Ti etnični stereotipi so pogosto temeljili na prejšnjih literarnih konvencijah o določenih skupinah, npr. o stepskih ljudstvih v antiki. Vključeni so viri iz različnih tradicij, regij in jezikov, da je razvidna široka razširjenost takšnih podob po vsej Evropi. Osmani in Rusi so bili, tako kot druga (vzhodna) ljudstva, pogosto podvrženi orientalističnim upodobitvam. Kljub spremembam v modi in slogu skozi čas ter med družbenimi razredi so osrednji stereotipi o njih ostali relativno nespremenjeni. Od začetka šestnajstega do konca osemnajstega stoletja so oblačila, povezana z Rusi in Osmani, poudarjala iste ključne značilnosti: kaftan in krzno za Ruse ter turbane za Osmane.

*Ključne besede: etnični stereotipi, oblačila, Osmanski imperij, Rusija, zgodnji novi vek*

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