

The Representation of the Balkans in Belgian Comics

[CAN for Balkans, Belgium]

Foreword

As has been indicated and explained in the last meeting in Braşov (Oct. 2021), this document(ation), which I entitled 'The Representation of the Balkans in Belgian Comics', does not strictly follow the suggested table of contents of the working documents of the other *CAN for Balkans* 'delegations', Albania, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia, for the obvious reason that Belgium is *not* located in the Balkans. Therefore, it was not considered to be very relevant to give an overview of a.o. the oldest history of the comics medium in Belgium. Belgian comics history, French-language as well as Flemish, has already been extensively described and studied (e.g., De Weyer 2015).

As I was given the opportunity to explain to the audience in Veles (Aug. 2021) – for which I once again want to thank the initiator and facilitators of this unifying project –, I have considered it fruitful to present Belgium's dealing with the Balkans, in its so-called Ninth Art, with the help / through the lens of the academic discipline of imagology. As will be clear, I have chosen to present parameters and tools to potentially study *all* (types of) Western comics on the Balkans or about people from the Balkans, so certainly not only Belgian comics, although it are of course the latter which have provided me with most of my examples here. The fact that several parameters and/or tools are not (very well) applicable yet to Belgian comics should also help make visible certain blind spots.

I sincerely hope this approach can provide comics authors – and comics historians alike – from all over and even outside the Balkans with some new insights on how to deal in the near future with visualizing and narrating the history of this historically astonishingly rich and various and – for me personally at least – most fascinating peninsula of Europe, not to say on earth.

MDD

Contents

Foreword	1
Contents	2
1. Imagology of the Balkans Through the Ages	4
1.1 What is imagology?	4
1.2 What is/are 'the Balkans' (vis-à-vis Southeast Europe)?.....	6
1.3 Balkan images and their origins	7
1.3.1 Balkan images linked to geography.....	7
1.3.2 Balkan images linked to history and population	8
1.4 Evolution of the images: negative / neutral / positive connotations.....	10
1.4.1 Evolution of the auto-images	10
1.4.2 Evolution of the hetero-images.....	12
1.5 Relation with images about the Orient	16
2. 'Visualizing' the Balkans: Characters, Places and Historical Periods.....	18
2.1 Characters.....	18
2.1.1 General stereotypes for 'all' Balkan peoples.....	18
2.1.2 Balkan stereotypes per nationality	20
2.1.3 Stereotypes for (a part of) the Balkan and other non-West European peoples	20
2.2 Places.....	21
2.3 Periods: historical 'legacies' on the Balkans.....	22
3. The Genres of Belgian Comics	25
3.1 Overview of 'Belgian' comics genres.....	25
3.2 Historical comics and their subtypes.....	32
3.2.1 Nonfiction	32
3.2.2 Historical fiction.....	34
3.2.3 Alternate history.....	36
4. The Representation of the Balkans in Belgian Comics Before the Cold War	38
4.1 Before 'King Ottokar's Sceptre'?	38
4.2 Case study 1: Hergé's 'King Ottokar's Sceptre' (<i>Tintin</i> #8).....	39
4.2.1 Title and summary	39
4.2.2 Background and Balkan allusions	41
4.2.3 Analyzing a panel with the 'imagological parameters'	45
5. The Representation of the Balkans in Belgian Comics During the Cold War	47

5.1. Whither the Balkans during the Cold War?.....	47
5.2 Case study 2: Willy Vandersteen 'De moloch' (<i>De Rode Ridder</i> #73).....	48
6. The Representation of the Balkans in Belgian Comics After the Cold War.....	52
6.1 The impact of the Fall of Communism and the Yugoslav Wars on Belgian comics about the Balkans.....	52
6.2 Case study 3: Hermann's <i>Sarajevo-Tango</i>	53
7. Conclusion: Five Balkan Paradigms	57
7.1 The Ruritanian Balkans	57
7.2 The uncanny Balkans	59
7.3 The exotic (Euro-Orientalist) Balkans	63
7.4 The documentary Balkans	67
7.5 The mirroring Balkans	68
8. Bibliography.....	70

1. Imagology of the Balkans Through the Ages

1.1 What is imagology?

In his state-of-the-art article, 'Imagology: On Using Ethnicity to Make Sense of the World', Joep Leerssen, the main authority in this subdiscipline, which soon after World War II originated as a branch of comparative literature (to study the representation of foreigners), defines 'imagology' as follows: "the discursive study of ethnotypes (stereotypical attributions of national character)" (2016: 13).

- Such attributions are, as it were, inherently oppositional: they construct an *us versus them* opposition.
 - imagologists distinguish between so-called 'auto-images' (of oneself) and 'hetero-images' (of the other)¹
 - it goes without saying that Belgian comics about the Balkans (usually)² represent *hetero*-images of the region
- Imagology does *not* serve to understand societies, let alone personalities (imagology ≠ sociology, psychology ...)
 - it aims to better understand discourses, texts, rhetorical, poetical devices, conventions
 - a.o. visual and textual discourses in *comics*
- The potentially distinguishable, separable elements that together constitute the image a reader (spectator/viewer; in general: 'recipient') gets when reading/watching a (fictional) work on a particular people / region / ... can be defined as *imagologemes*, that is, blocks that build the image (imagological building blocks).
 - further on, I will distinguish between character-related and setting-/period-relating imagologemes

Although Leerssen's (sub)definition of 'ethnotype' mentions "*national character*" (my emphasis), imagology can also deal with *supranational* regions/entities; e.g. the Balkans.

- In this 'imagological' overview, the Balkans will be discussed:
 - as an internally undifferentiated macroregion
 - this applies to comics adventures
 - that merely mention '(somewhere in) the Balkans' as their setting (e.g., Vandersteen 1989a: strips 1-2; infra: 5.2)

¹ Soon after WWII, "[l]iterary scholars began to note that national characterizations related, first and foremost, not to an external anthropological reality mimetically represented, but to an oppositional discursive economy of other national characterizations, most fundamentally along an axis of Self vs. Other (soon termed 'auto-image' vs. 'hetero-image')" (Leerssen 2016: 15-16).

² A conceivable exception would be a comics book by an émigré from the Balkans living in Belgium (and working with a Franco-Belgian publisher).

- that take place in fictitious Balkan locations, e.g., Hergé's famous Syldavia from *Tintin's 'King Ottokar's Sceptre'* (*Le sceptre d'Ottokar*, 1947; originally 'Tintin in Syldavia' ['Tintin en Syldavie', 1938-1939]) whether or not connectable to a real country or other location (cf. Niță 2014)
- as a macroregion as diversified as at least every (self-declared) separate former and/or current nation within its vague borders
 - hence subdivisions of Balkan imagology such as Romania-, Serbia-, Greece- or Yugoslavia-related imagology, obviously applying to comics adventures (explicitly) taking place in the respective (former) countries/locations

1.2 What is/are 'the Balkans' (vis-à-vis Southeast Europe)?

- Probably the first image coming to one's mind when thinking about the Balkans – even when one does not know the etymology of the word – is what the word etymologically stands for:
 - older Turkish for 'chain of forested mountains'
 - also suggested (a mixed Persian and Turkish etymology): *balk* (Persian for 'mud') + Turkish diminutive suffix *-an*
- Gradual shift in meaning:
 - 'Balkans' in the narrow sense' (mountain range in Serbia-Bulgaria) →
 - 'Balkans' in the broad sense of the ancient 'Haemus' peninsula
 - in 1808, in his *Gea: Versuch einer wissenschaftlichen Erdbeschreibung* (*Gea: Attempt at a Scientific Description of the Earth*) German educator-geographer August Zeune coins the term *Balkanhalbeiland* (now *Balkanhalbinsel*, 'Balkan Peninsula'), taking the mountain range as its northern border (Vezenkov 2017: 117)
 - widely accepted only in 1870s-1880s (Goldsworthy 1998: 3)
 - up to the 19th cent. also referred to as Hellenic, Illyrian, Dardanian, Roman, Byzantine, and/or as (with explicit reference to the Ottoman rule): European Turkey, Turkey-in-Europe, European Ottoman Empire, Oriental Peninsula, and/or (referring to specific ethnicities) (Slavo-)Greek Peninsula, South-Slavic Peninsula
 - Thus: 'Balkans' became synonymous with what German geographer Theobald Fischer in 1909 proposed to call *Südosteuropa* ('Southeastern Europe')
 - which is currently the more politically correct form
 - however, 'Balkans' can nowadays also refer to 'Southeastern Europe minus Hungary, Romania and Slovenia' (for those people, of course, who consider these three countries as parts of Southeastern Europe)³
 - according to some the Balkans even begin in Austria⁴
 - Mainland Greece and European Turkey – geographically without doubt part of the Balkan Peninsula – are often seen as (very) different from the rest of the Balkans, because they were never part of the Eastern (communist) Bloc

³ Slovenia has never been a part of the Ottoman Empire, (most of) Hungary rather limited in time (1541-1699). The Romanian principalities had the 'in-between' status of vassal states. Here, one can include the former Soviet state and currently (since 1991) independent republic of Moldova (the eastern part of the historical principality of Moldavia [in Romanian, both are called *Moldova*], the western part of which is part of Romania and thus the European Union). In Vandersteen's 1976 'Avontuur in Moldavië' ('Adventure in Moldavia/Moldova'), from the *Robert en Bertrand* series, it is not specified where exactly in historical Moldavia the action takes place. In any case, the scenery/'decoration' is clearly Balkan(esque).

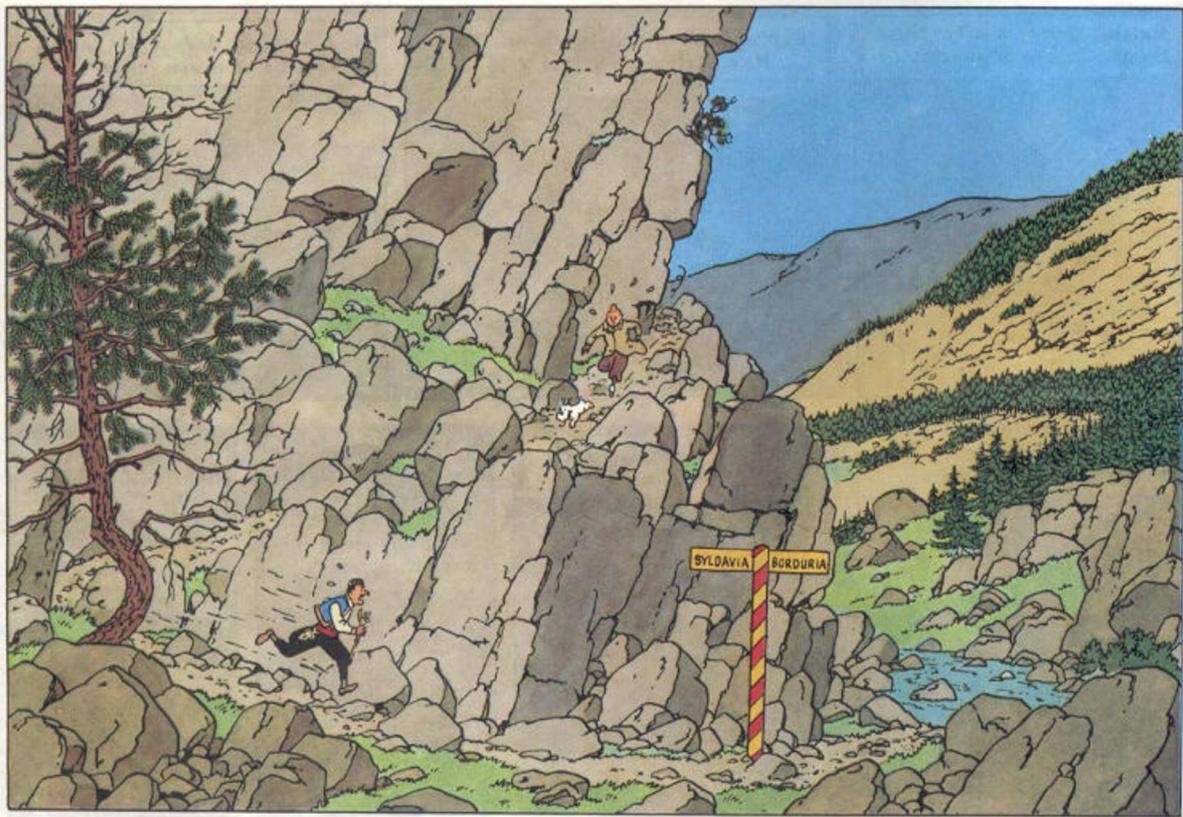
⁴ Goldsworthy (1998: 7): "that Austrianness is 'tainted' by the Balkans lies behind the observation that the origins of Nazism are Balkan. In his book *Balkan Ghosts* [1993], the American writer Robert Kaplan sees Hitler's Austrian background (implicitly his 'Balkanness') as somehow responsible for his monstrous philosophy."

1.3 Balkan images and their origins

- The (sub)images (A-H) that will be presented below do not all operate at the same (conceptual) level; some are clearly more general or time-bound than others and there is inevitably a great deal of overlap. The list could certainly be extended and some of the (sub)images might be subdivided.

1.3.1 Balkan images linked to geography

- cf. etymology (supra): ‘chain of forested mountains’ → **mountainous, difficult to penetrate, isolated ... [A]**; and hence: dangerous, mysterious, uncanny ...
 - highest mountain peaks:
 - in the Balkans in the narrow sense: Mount Botev (Bulgaria, 2376 m)
 - on the Balkan Peninsula: Mount Musala (Bulgaria, Rila Mountains, 2925 m)



The chase scene near the border between Syldavia and Borduria in Tintin's 'King Ottokar Sceptre' (1997: 52)

- on the other hand: **geographical 'bridge' between East and West [B]** (North and South) or vice versa
 - important overland route between Western(/Northern) Europe and Asia (more specifically: the Near/Middle East)

1.3.2 Balkan images linked to history and population

- Because they functioned as a (mountainous) bridge between East and West (North and South) or vice versa (cf. supra): the Balkans are still known for their **great ethnic variety [C]**
 - many different ethnic groups passed and/or (temporarily) settled there
 - up to ca. 1000 AD: Thracians, Hellenes, Illyrians, Celts, Dacians, Huns, Avars, Visi- and Ostrogoths, South Slavs ...
 - more recently: internal migrations under Ottoman rule, e.g. the Great Migration of the Serbs to Habsburg Empire in the 17th-18th cent.
 - many of them could survive there relatively isolated (thanks to the mountainous area)
 - cf. the fact that Romania is – linguistically speaking – the so-called ‘Romance island in the [mainly] Slavic sea’
 - connected to this/on the other hand: testifying of its non-isolation: the so-called *Balkansprachbund* (‘Balkan language area’)
 - → image of the melting pot (*macédoine*), both positively and negatively
- Because of historical developments, the Balkans also became (conceived as) a **historical-cultural ‘border zone’ [D]:**
 - dividing-line between Western and Eastern Roman Empire (first centuries AD) ran through the region
 - which lies at the basis of the dividing-line between ‘Western’ (later on: Catholic) and ‘Eastern’ (later on: Orthodox) Christianity, with resp. Rome and Constantinople as their centre
 - confusion in medieval Serbia: “‘At first we were confused. The East thought that we were West while the West considered us to be the East,’ St Sava (Nemanjic, 1175-1235), the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church, wrote in an epistle” (Goldsworthy 1998: 8).
 - which was made concrete through the 1054 Schism → not only religious, but also (and esp.!) huge (broader) cultural and political differences
 - cf. Croats vs. Serbs in the Yugoslav Wars
 - → overlapping of Byzantine and Balkan images: all (mostly bad) connotations related to Byzantine history, phenomena ... can potentially be found in the current Balkan images
 - from 14th cent. onwards: border zone where Ottoman rule & Islam met Europe & Christianity
 - gradually: border zone where European powers met the (centuries later) waning Ottoman power
 - 20th cent.: border zone where during the Cold War different kinds of communism met (and clashed): Soviet (~ Bulgarian), Albanian, Romanian, Yugoslav
 - Yugoslavia and its (Tito’s) ‘Third Way’ itself can be considered a border zone where capitalism met communism

- (imagology-wise very prominent): the Balkans as the large, **partially Islamized region in Europe where the Ottoman Empire ruled [E]** from the 14th until the 20th cent.
 - key year 1453: Byzantine ('Roman', as the Byzantines referred to themselves)⁵ capital Constantinople becomes the capital of the Ottoman Empire – after the siege led by Sultan Mehmed II (later thanks to this: 'Mehmed the Conqueror' [*Fatih*])
 - apogee (geographically): 1566, under Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent⁶
 - Due to this centuries-long Ottoman rule, Islam got a foothold in Southeastern Europe. This, in combination with the fact that the Ottomans did not (systematically) force their Muslim faith on the Christian inhabitants of the peninsula (although a.o. economic circumstances often made it attractive for Christians to convert to Islam), the Balkans became and remained a **border zone between Christianity and (Sunni) Islam**
 - the former itself being a border zone (cf. supra) between Orthodox (mainly in the East and the middle) and Catholic (mainly in the West) Christianity
 - apart from that, in Ottoman times the region also counted a considerable number of Jews (cf. the Jewish *millet*)⁷
 - → image of the Balkans as a region of religious transition and conflicts, the arena for a 'clash of civilizations'
 - cf. Živančević-Sekeruš (2007: 105): "[...] the place where East met West, but also a place that did not truly belong to either of the two worlds. This double negation – neither East nor West – led to the often simplified image of the Balkans as 'somewhere in-between'."

- The Balkans as the **arena** – from the 19th cent. onwards – **for uprisings of the 'European' peoples against Ottoman rule [F]**, marking the beginning:
 - of independent nation-states in the region, with first of all the
 - Serbian uprisings
 - Greek uprisings
 - of nationalism – nowadays generally considered as 'bad influence' from the West (**European powers' meddling into the region [G]**)

- Closely related to that: the Balkans as the **arena for** – hence the image of – **'never-ending' interethnic struggling among the 'European' peoples on the peninsula [H]**
 - the Macedonian Question (19th-20th cent.), resonating in the discussions about the name of the independent (FYROM, Former Yugoslav Republic of) – now 'North' – Macedonia

⁵ Just like 'Balkan peninsula' (see 1.2), the term 'Byzantine' – it is agreed – dates from post-medieval times and was first applied in its modern sense by a German scholar, the sixteenth-century Hieronymus Wolf.

⁶ See also Julie Loiseau's historiographical peritext (cf. note 19) in Bruneau, et al. 2018.

⁷ For the Ottoman *millet* system (there was also an Armenian *millet*) – comparable to the Belgian political 'communities', see, e.g., Detrez 1994.

- the two Balkan Wars (1912-1913)
- the fact that the trigger for WWI took place in the region: the assassination, by the Bosnian Gavrilo Princip (the son of a postman), of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand (Sarajevo, 28 Jun. 1914)
- → coining of the negative term 'balkanization' (in an interview with the German-Jewish industrialist, writer and politician Walther Rathenau, *New York Times*, 20 Dec. 1918)
 - helped consolidate the image(s) of fragmentation of the region into small states, sharpening of conflicts (due to 'blind' nationalism) with little hope for negotiated compromise, because of the inextricably mixed (in terms of religion, ethnicity, languages) groups
 - consequently, the term 'balkanization' was (and may still be) also applied to regions/countries in the world outside Southeast Europe, e.g., Africa (during the decolonization) or (more recently) Belgium
 - even to disciplines, e.g., 'the balkanization of English studies' as put by Harold Bloom (Goldsworthy 1998: 5)
- the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), though geographically limited to the so-called Western Balkans, revived/intensified the old(er) Balkan images
- Because of all the former history-related images: the pejorative image of the Balkans as a place with violent, all too passionate and at the same time backward (uncultured, primitive, but also in the sense of poor, financially weak), suspicious populations (cf. infra, 2.1.1)
 - also due to the machinations of the Western powers (as it would be gradually more and more commonly held), which made the Balkan peoples and states(-to-be) economically highly dependent.

1.4 Evolution of the images: negative / neutral / positive connotations

1.4.1 Evolution of the auto-images

- A thought-provoking literary / literarized (fictional) auto-image during the Ottoman Empire is offered in Ismail Kadare's *Elegy for Kosovo (Tri këngë zie për Kosovën, 1998)*:
 - "About the Ottoman army that had set off in the meantime, all kinds of rumours circulated, both true and not so true. What frightened people most, however, were the names 'Balkan' and 'Balkan inhabitant'. Before the Turks had even set foot on the peninsula, they had given the peninsula, or its inhabitants, these names, which seemed to wrap around them as tightly and smoothly as the new skin of a freshly moulted reptile. The inhabitants thought it was terrible. Again and again they muttered these two names in their sleep so as to rid themselves of them, but the result was the opposite: they seemed

to grow more and more attached to them. Only now did they realize that in their discord they had never had the chance to find a name for their peninsula themselves. One spoke of "Illyricum", then another came up with "New Byzantium", a third with "Alpania" because of the Albanian Alps or with "Greater Slavonia" because of the Slavs who lived there, and so on. Now it was too late to do anything about it, and so it came about that without a common name, worse still, with a name given to them by the enemy, they would go into the battle [of Kosovo, 1389] that would be their downfall." (Kadare 1999: 24-25; my trans.)

- In Turkish and Albanian “the term [‘Balkan’] has almost no negative connotations” (Živančević-Sekeruš 2007: 106) → so the negative connotations have to be looked for outside the languages and discourses of the mainly Muslim Turks and Albanians in the region, that is, in the languages and the discourses of the predominantly Christian peoples/nations →
- “In Greek, Romanian, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian⁸ and Macedonian, the term ranges from neutral to pejorative, while in Bulgarian it may have all of these connotations – from neutral to negative to positive (meaning independent, proud, brave, honourable).” (Živančević-Sekeruš 2007: 106)
- Over the last decade, the term seems to have acquired a more positive connotation in the region, also outside Bulgaria, e.g.:
 - ‘Balkan’ in the names of cafés
 - proudness about Balkan cuisine
 - proudness about Balkan music
- → ‘Balkan’ can be hip, cool, fun ...
- the term is considered to have a unifying potential
 - the name of the Romanian-Serbian-Albanian-North Macedonian (& Belgian) historical comics project ‘CAN for Balkans’ (2021-2023; led by Nicolae Pepene, Braşov County Museum of History)



⁸ I will not dwell here on the question whether Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian (and Montenegrin) – BC(M)S are essentially one and the same (pluricentric) language.

1.4.2 Evolution of the hetero-images

Esp. from Western Europe,⁹ originally from travellers', diplomats', scholars', folklorists' ... accounts and other texts (= **phase 1 of the process of 'literary colonization'**, cf. Goldsworthy 1998: 2)

- before the Balkan Wars (1912-1913):
 - mixed connotations:
 - “hospitality, unspoilt by civilization, close to the earth, close-knit rural communities” [i.e., ‘positive primitiveness’] ~ idealized, romantic, nostalgia-inducing world
 - alongside “cruelty, superstition, shiftlessness, untrustworthiness, dishonesty, misogyny, dirtiness” (Živančević-Sekeruš 2007: 107)
 - → overall (an unpleasant sense of) confusion, often accompanied by pity for the so-called Ottoman yoke imposed on these peoples
 - ambiguous/ironic evolution: as long as the Christian Balkan people were Ottoman-ruled, they were considered “enslaved Europeans. The moment when the newly independent Balkan states are supposed to be joining Europe is, however, also the moment when they are symbolically differentiated from it and a new – ‘Balkan’ – Other is created.” (Goldsworthy 1998: 11)
 - pejorative connotations consolidated and popularized through works of novelists, playwrights, poets (= **phase 2 of the process of 'literary colonization'**, cf. Goldsworthy 1998: 2)
 - “The Balkan worlds of popular imagination are peopled by British [/Irish] creations” (Goldsworthy 1998: x, who further on speaks of not so innocent “‘imaginative colonisation’”, 1998: 2), esp.:
 - Anthony Hope’s Ruritania (< *The Prisoner of Zenda*, 1894)

⁹ I.e., most relevantly from the 16th cent. onwards (cf. Živančević-Sekeruš 2007: 106). For this study, limited to hetero-images *in the West*, Balkan images from other parts of the world (esp. those from Russia have been studied, see Todorova 2009: 82-88) have not been taken into account.

Ruritanian adjective



Ru-ri-ta-ni-an | \ ˈrūr-ə-,tā-nē-ən ˌrūr-ə-ˈtā- \

Definition of *Ruritanian*

: of, relating to, or having the characteristics of an imaginary place of high romance

Did you know?

In 1894, British author Anthony Hope published *The Prisoner of Zenda*, a novel set in the mythical kingdom of Ruritania. The book relates the adventures of Rudolf Rassendyll, a British gentleman who impersonates the king of Ruritania to save him from a treasonous plot. An improbable but high-spirited tale filled with heroes, villains, courtly intrigue, romance, and sword play, Hope's narrative (and its fictional locale) quickly captured the imagination of the public. Within two years of the novel's publication, George Bernard Shaw had seen fit to use "Ruritanian" as a generic adjective: "Our common sense ... must immediately put a summary stop to the somewhat silly Ruritanian gambols of our imagination." Romantic or fanciful places or things have been "Ruritanian" ever since.

- Bram Stoker's Transylvania (< *Dracula*, 1897)
 - an important difference between fictitious (Hope's Ruritania, Stoker's Land of the Blue Mountains in *The Lady of the Shroud* [1909], Hergé's Syldavia and Borduria in *Tintin's 'King Ottokar's Sceptre'*) and concrete historical Balkan countries
- "The comparative absence of direct economic involvement in the Balkans thus perversely supported the influence of the imagery which originated in the Anglophone countries, helping to shape the way the Balkans continue to be perceived throughout the rest of the world." (Goldsworthy 1998: xi)
- from the Balkan Wars onwards:

- Balkans mainly associated with violence
 - dominating image of the Balkans as a powder keg, a place of unceasing (political) intrigue
 - “While an ‘enlightened, democratic West’ defines itself in terms of contrast to a ‘despotic East’, the ‘industrious’, rational cultures of the North claim a position of superiority over the ‘undisciplined’, passionate cultures of southern Europe, establishing a kind of European hierarchy in which the north-west represents the highest and the south-east the lowest symbolic value.”¹⁰
- 1930s:
 - the period in which the “most abiding images of the region were created through the indirect colonisation and exploitation of Balkan settings by the British and American entertainment industries [= **final phase (3) of the process of ‘literary colonization’**, cf. Goldsworthy 1998: 2]. This process has much more to do with the needs and the power of these industries than with any real interest in the area.” (Goldsworthy 1998: x)
 - Balkans as an exotic (cf. the mountainous geography, minarets!) backdrop for tales of adventure, violence, (political) intrigue, the uncanny (and [in comics to a lesser extent:] romance)
 - Agatha Christie’s *Orient Express* (< *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1934), with the train trapped by heavy snowfall in Yugoslavia
- confused image during Cold War:
 - unclear status / knowledge in the West about ‘how’ communist / USSR-dominated the region was (cf. Yugoslavia’s ‘third way’, Albania’s relations with China, Ceaușescu’s so-called maverick position)
 - for evocations of ‘life behind the Iron Curtain’ writers/artists and readers/audiences rather turned to / thought about Soviet Russian (and sometimes Polish, Czechoslovak) settings
 - in any case: the ‘Western Europe – Balkans opposition’ was “perpetuated at the moment when the ‘ideological Other’ of

¹⁰ Goldsworthy (1998: 8), and she adds: “In terms of an imagined map of Europe defined in this way, ‘Britishness’ and ‘Balkanness’ stand at opposing ends of the hierarchical diagonal. [...] A particularly British orientalisising rhetoric identifies all lands across the English Channel as a corrupt and undisciplined Other (with Brussels as the heart of the new ‘Byzantium’ which threatens to swallow the values of Britishness)” (ibid.) – a peculiar case of nesting orientalisms!

Communism replaced ‘the symbolic geography of Eastern inferiority’” (Goldsworthy 1998: 5, referring to Bakić-Hayden & Hayden 1992)

- the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), though geographically limited to the so-called Western Balkans, revived/intensified the older Balkan images [cf. supra]
 - + catalyst to shatter/discuss the stereotypes and stereotypical thinking (along with the changing Zeitgeist)
- 21st cent.:
 - the term ‘Balkan’ generally avoided in official course names (Academia’s political correctness)
 - at the same time growing popularity, e.g., in names of festivals, such as ‘Balkan Trafik’ (Belgium)
 - though: the macroregion’s road to ‘genuine European’ (whatever that may be) integration is often regarded as long

1.5 Relation with images about the Orient¹¹

Western images about the Orient, esp. the Middle East, were famously discussed and shattered by Edward Said in his monograph *Orientalism* (1978; which has often been criticized since).

- Also because the Balkans were dominated for so many centuries by (and mainly/most of the time *part of*) a Muslim empire, many Middle East- (and Islam-) related clichés – as studied and questioned by Said – have been applied to the region.
 - in Said's line of thought ('binary' thinking): the (Middle) East ~ the Balkans as the Other (in the perception of Western Europe / 'the West') = THEY = everything what WE are not
 - → negative hetero-images about the Balkans
 - can be called Euro-Orientalist (cf. Van Heuckelom 2009; under reference to Ezequiel Adamovsky)
 - help construct a positive West European / Western auto-image
- Parallels between how 'the' (/Said's) Orient and how the Balkans have been and are perceived in the West have been discussed and adjusted by (emigrated!) scholars such as
 - Milica Bakić-Hayden (& Robert Hayden 1992: 4; concept of 'nesting orientalisms')
 - Maria Todorova (1997, concept of 'Balkanism', coined after 'Orientalism'),
 - Balkans as the 'Other *within*' vs. the Orient as the Other → 'moral duty' to be politically correct towards the inhabitants of the Balkans developed more slowly than towards other non-Western peoples¹²
 - discusses applicability of postcolonial study tools & paradigms
 - Vesna Goldsworthy (1998)
 - the Balkans as the only Christian region in (*early*) *modern* history that was 'colonized' by a Muslim colonizer
 - "Although the physical colonisation of large parts of the Balkans by the Ottoman Empire provides a reverse example of traditional colonial patterns (a portion of Europe dominated by an Eastern, alien and non-Christian empire), this 'textual colonisation' has

¹¹ This paragraph may be considered part of the ethnotypes'/stereotypes' so-called *intertextual* (or even 'interstereotypical') analysis, together with the contextual and textual analyses the three levels within Leerssen's "threefold procedure" (2016: 20) through which one can carry out a thorough imagological study on any relevant text (in the broadest sense of the word).

¹² At least in 1998, Goldsworthy considered it "possible for writers who consider themselves to be advanced exponents of European multicultural ideals to write about Albanians, Croats, Serbs, Bulgarians and Romanians with the sort of generalised, open condescension which would appal them if applied to Somalis or the peoples of Zaire" (1998: xi).

provided the industries of the imagination with easy, unchallenged access to raw material. In contrast, while Ottoman rule surpassed in its longevity almost any instance of Western colonisation, its direct narrative contribution to the way the Balkans are seen and imagined by outsiders is negligible.” (1998: x; see also 2)

2. 'Visualizing' the Balkans: Characters, Places and Historical Periods

When visualizing a comics story, the authors (script writer and artist, often one and the same person) have to think about the characters with whom and the settings and periods with/in which to 'build' ('dress') them.

2.1 Characters

As has been said, in – as well as outside – comics, the Balkan peoples can be and have been stereotyped

- **(1)** as a whole, so in general, in terms (*character-related imagologemes*) supposedly pertaining to all the inhabitants of the peninsula or
- **(2)** as a macroregion comprising several smaller geographical entities – usually nations/countries – with their own, more specific stereotyped images or ethnotypes.

2.1.1 General stereotypes for 'all' Balkan peoples

- Balkan people have often been considered to be (see 1.3-1.5 for the origins and so-called explanations of these stereotypes) (Živančević-Sekeruš 2007: 105-107)
 - (potentially) positive:
 - primitive [psBp¹³ 1]
 - unspoilt by civilization [psBp 2]
 - passionate (impassioned) [psBp 3]
 - independent [psBp 4]
 - proud [psBp 5]
 - brave [psBp 6]
 - honourable [psBp 7]
 - hospitable [psBp 8]
 - close-knit (within their communities) [psBp 9]
 - negative:
 - backward [nsBp¹⁴ 1]
 - uncultured [nsBp 2]
 - primitive [nsBp 3]
 - poor [nsBp 4]
 - covetous [nsBp 5]
 - rapacious [nsBp 6]
 - intriguing [nsBp 7]
 - fearful [nsBp 8]

¹³ Stands for 'positive stereotype for (potentially) all Balkan peoples'.

¹⁴ Stands for 'negative stereotype for (potentially) all Balkan peoples'.

- violent [nsBp 9]
 - passionate [nsBp 10]
 - receptive to machinations (from their leaders, from West) [nsBp 11]
 - cruel [nsBp 12]
 - superstitious [nsBp 13]
 - shiftless [nsBp 14]
 - untrustworthy [nsBp 15]
 - dishonest [nsBp 16]
 - misogynous [nsBp 17]
 - dirty [nsBp 18]
 - suspicious [nsBp 19]
- It goes without saying that several of these stereotypes unavoidably overlap and that both sets, the positive as well as the negative, can be extended.

2.1.2 Balkan stereotypes per nationality

- Not so much for the German-speaking nations/countries – which, because of their location and historical (often dominant) role in Central (*Mitteleuropa*) and East-Central Europe, had close contacts with their Slavic, Hungarian or Romanian neighbours –, but certainly so for the further-away West European countries, such as the English-, French- and Dutch-speaking, the Balkans and their peoples were in general very far from their minds.
 - No wonder, then, that they have no stereotypes for most of the individual peoples/nations on the peninsula.
 - Four bigger countries, however, – only one of them undisputably / totally located *within* the Balkans (see 1.2) – turn out to be an exception; in alphabetical order: Greece, Romania, Serbia and Turkey.
 - because these four countries are (were meant to be) / were originally conceived as nation states and/or are named after the dominant people living in it, we can also speak here of *ethnotypes*

2.1.2.1 Greeks

cf. Paschalidis 2007

2.1.2.2 Romanians

cf. Deletant 2007

2.1.2.3 Serbs

cf. Sekeruš 2007

2.1.2.4 Turks

cf. Kuran-Burçoğlu 2007

2.1.3 Stereotypes for (a part of) the Balkan and other non-West European peoples
e.g. Slavic stereotypes (Naarden 2007)

2.2 Places

Apart from character-related imagologemes (2.1-2.3) comics authors also have to consider how to shape the geographic and historical setting of the stories they want to tell. This is where *setting- and period-related imagologemes* are at stake. As for the geographic location, they have the following options. From more vaguely to more concretely, they can

- **(1)** choose a fictitious country
 - e.g., Syldavia
- **(2)** keep the setting as vague as merely indicating (by means of a narrator's caption box) something like 'somewhere in the Balkans' (cf. supra, Vandersteen 1989a: strips 1-2)
 - of course, even then, certain background details (e.g., landscape-related, architectural) may give a hint to locate the setting more precisely within the Balkans¹⁵
- **(3)** explicitly indicate the name of a (former) country, region, city, village, etc., not seldom accompanied by the mentioning of a specific historical period (cf. 2.3) or even year (or exact date)

The more realistic an artist's style, the more he will tend to draw recognizable buildings, monuments, landscapes, city or other views.

- These, then, will automatically function as 'building blocks' potentially¹⁶ indicating where precisely the action takes place (even if situated in fictitious countries, cf. note 15).

¹⁵ This does not mean that readers (scholars and/or fans) cannot look for such clues in comics set in fictitious countries, as has been greatly demonstrated by Niță 2014.

¹⁶ That is: implicitly (for those readers recognizing them), when the location is not explicitly mentioned by the narrator and/or the speaking characters and/or road signs, etc.

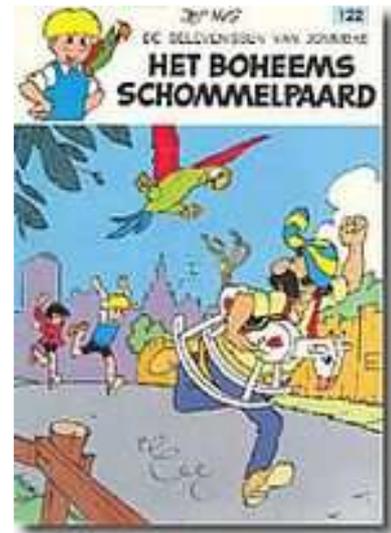
2.3 Periods: historical 'legacies' on the Balkans

Through the ages the Balkan Peninsula has been the – often only partial – 'setting' ('arena') of the history of many peoples, supranational constellations, empires, religions, ideologies ...

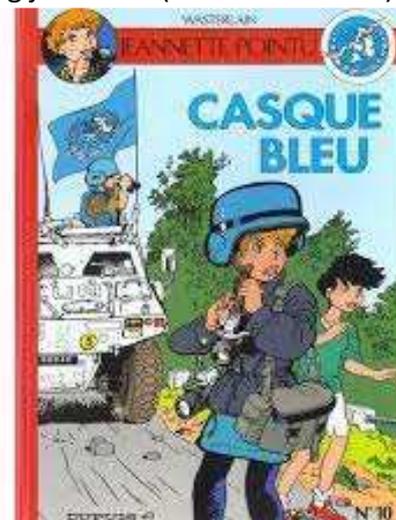
- Basing myself on the following approach: [T]he Balkans as a synonym for Southeastern Europe emerge as a complex palimpsest of consecutive legacies, which have territorially included it in different mega-regions¹⁷ (Todorova 2018: 91; see also Detrez & Segaert 2008), regarding historical periods I – rather than between (e.g.) exact centuries – consider it more fruitful to distinguish between legacies that left their (some of them more or less indelible) marks on the Balkans.
- Especially authors of historical comics, but in fact any author dealing in whatever other genre with (a part of) the vast region in one way or other has to face at least one of the following legacies – the list is as chronological as possible, but not exhaustive:
 - the Ancient Greek legacy [L1]
 - the Ancient Macedonian legacy [L2]
 - comics related to Alexander the Great
 - the Roman legacy [L3]
 - the Jewish legacy [L4]
 - the early Christian legacy [L5]
 - i.e., before the 'official' 1054 Schism
 - the Byzantine legacy [L6]
 - the Slavic legacy [L7]
 - the Orthodox Christian legacy [L8]
 - the Catholic Christian legacy [L9]
 - the Romani legacy [L10]
 - sometimes boiling down to the – in 'more general', and nowadays less political correct – 'gypsy' legacy
 - e.g., Jef Nys' 'Het Boheems schommelpaard' ('The Bohemian rocking horse', *De belevenissen van Jommeke* #122, 1984)¹⁸

¹⁷ These 'mega-regions' do certainly not always include the *entire* Balkans. However, thinking in these terms ensures that there are always sufficient recognisable links with history from outside the Balkans. In this way, imagology becomes much more than 'tracing clichés about nation(alities)'.

¹⁸ Although situated north of, and therefore not in, the Balkans, in this album 'Bohemia' does not stand for the western part of the present-day Czech Republic, but for the 'abstract' home of the 'gypsies', as the Roma are called in this album from one of Flanders' most popular children's comics series.



- the Wallachian legacy [L11]
 - almost always related to Vlad Țepeș and his times
- the Ottoman legacy [L12]
- the (Sunni) Muslim legacy [L13]
- the Habsburg legacy [L14]
- the communist legacy [L15]
- the Yugoslav legacy [L16]
- the UN legacy [L17]
 - that is, the interference, in the Yugoslav Wars, of the UN Blue Helmets
 - the latter, during their work in former Yugoslavia, have a very prominent role in 'Casque bleu' of the *Jeannette Pointu* series, named after a young journalist (Wasterlain 1995)



- the EU legacy [L18]
- It goes without saying that very often several legacies will be 'applicable' simultaneously.

- I deliberately chose legacies that do *not* coincide with current countries (cf. note 17; although there are admittedly questionable cases, such as ‘Wallachian legacy’, which might have been replaced by ‘Romanian’, which is historically not the same, though, of course)
 - for legacies clearly and unquestionably related to one nation / current country, it can be sufficient for the imagologist (here, of Belgian comics taking place in the Balkans) merely to name or indicate the country / place (see 2.2) in question and then – as for the situation in time (2.3) – to speak about the historical legacy of that nation/country, e.g. ‘Albanian legacy’
 - however, adding extra historical legacies will usually allow for a welcome refinement in the determination of the historicity / historical orientation of the particular comics story

3. The Genres of Belgian Comics

As with books and stories *without* pictures, within the comics medium too, classification into genres can be a very difficult, sometimes even hopeless task, not only because of the high degree of overlap, but also because genres evolve in time. Nevertheless, since genres constitute the ‘glasses’ through which we view the narrative universe (a lens through which we also start to think about our own world, consciously or unconsciously), it definitely makes sense, in a study like this, to pay attention to the phenomenon of genre.

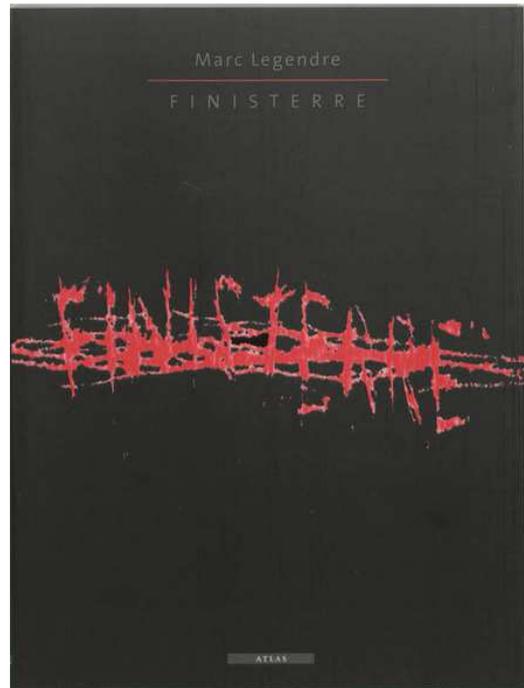
Every historian of (Franco-)Belgian comics presenting a list of genres makes his own distinction. Below I follow the extensive list made by Patrick Van Gompel and Ad Hendrickx (1995: 35-40), complemented with genres from Geert De Weyer’s more recent but less extensive overview (2005: 33-67). Per genre, wherever possible, I add examples of Belgian comics referring to the Balkans.

3.1 Overview of ‘Belgian’ comics genres

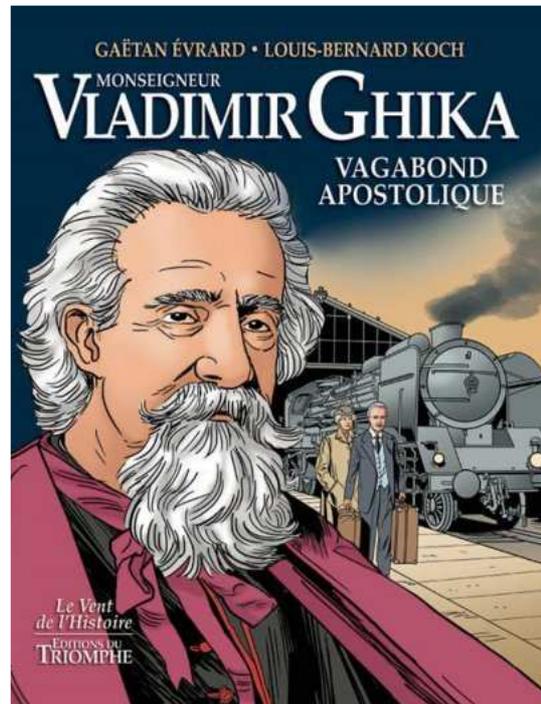
- **Adventure comics**
 - comics in which adventurous experiences of the characters are central; very often appearing in series

- **Animal comics**
 - comics featuring animals as their protagonists, usually ‘playing’ humans

- **Author’s comics / graphic novels**
 - so-called one-shots, comics / ‘graphic-novel’ stories which not belong to a series; sometimes, however, a longer story/graphic novel can be divided (e.g., for commercial reasons) into several issues/parts – which together can be conceived of as a (mini-)series
 - Hermann, *Sarajevo-tango* (1995)
 - cf. 6.2
 - Marc Legendre, *Finisterre* (2005)
 - in an experimental, suggestive style, this 65-page graphic novel tells the cruel story of a Bosnian woman who has fled the war in her homeland



- **Autobiographical comics (graphic novels)**
 - evidently such works are connected with the identity of their authors. The author tells about (a part) of her/his life (e.g., childhood memories) and/or about well- or little-known historical events in which s/he her-/himself was involved (however slightly), e.g., a war (episode)
- **Biographical comics**
 - usually dealing with the life of a historical person, see 3.2
 - e.g., the recent *Monseigneur Vladimir Ghika: vagabond apostolique* (2020; by the Belgian duo Gaëtan Évrard and Louis-Bernard Koch) about the Romanian diplomat Vladimir Ghika (Ghica; 1873-1954) who converted to Catholicism (considered a martyr and beatified in 2013)



- **Celebrity comics**
 - comics starring well-known people from sports, television etc.
 - esp. popular in Flanders
 - comics journalist Geert De Weyer has called them disparagingly ‘washing-powder comics’ (“waspoederstrips”; 2005: 35-37)
- **Children’s comics**
 - the more comics explicitly target children, the more likely they will use stereotyping
 - this was especially the case in the past
- **Comics adaptations of literary works**
 - obviously, these can come in as many (and even more) genres as those to which the literary works belong
 - cf. the vague plans to turn Ivan Vazov’s Bulgarian classic, *Under the Yoke* (*Под узомо* 1894), into a comics book
 - for the role of East European literature in Western comics adaptations, see, e.g., De Dobbeleer 2016
- **Detective comics**
 - ‘whodunnits’, comics centered around a detective
 - a non-Belgian example featuring the Balkans: Benjamin von Eckartsberg & Tsai Chaiko’s 2017 comics adaptation of Agatha

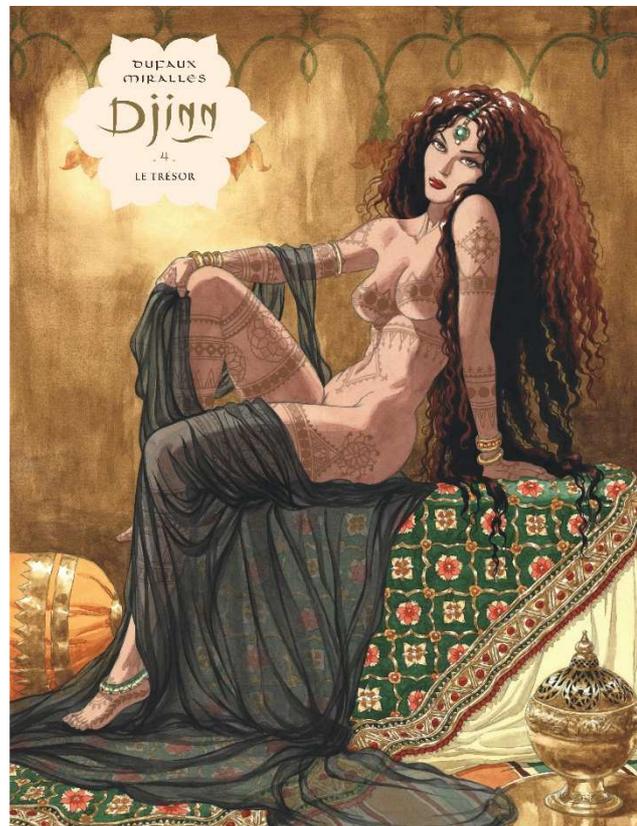
Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), where the 'detective' action (cf. supra, 1.4.2) starts when the train from the title is trapped by heavy snowfall in Yugoslavia

- **Educational comics**

- among the most relevant comics of this type in the context of this documentation are historical comics with obvious informative intentions, cf. infra

- **Erotic comics**

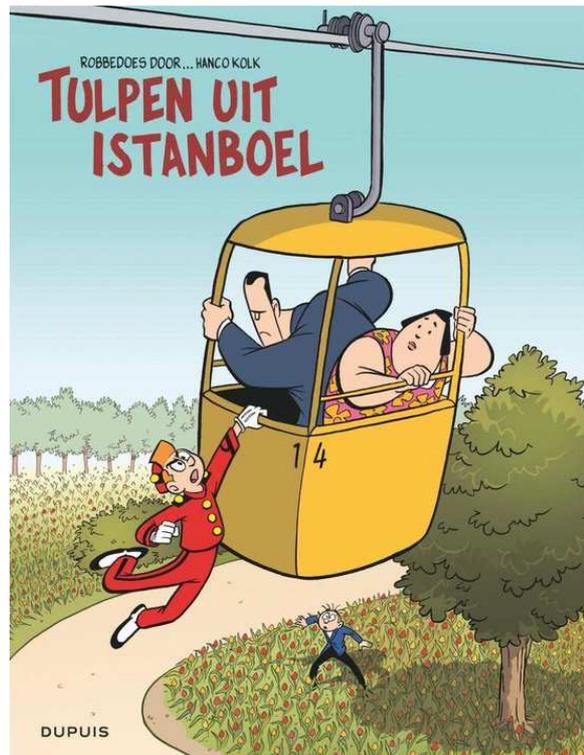
- that erotic comics can also deal with Balkan(-related) history proves the so-called 'Ottoman cycle', i.e., the first four albums of Belgian writer Jean Dufaux and Spanish artist Ana Mirallès' *Djinn* series (2001-2004), the action of which partly takes place in Istanbul, near the end of the Ottoman Empire



- **Family comics**

- an especially / particularly Flemish (adventurous-humoristic) 'genre' (see De Dobbeleer 2021a)
 - the adventures in question lead the heroes to virtually all places on earth (and beyond), sometimes (though rather rarely) also to the Balkans
 - e.g., the *Suske en Wiske* albums, mentioned under Vandersteen in the bibliography

- **Fantasy / Sword and sorcery comics**
 - for a Balkan-related example, see 5.2
- **Gag strips**
 - short humoristic usually one-page or -strip long comics
- **Graphic novels**
 - cf. supra: 'Author's comics'
- **Historical comics**
 - comics taking place in the past with the course of history as their subject or major backdrop
 - the stories do not necessarily have to be historical
 - scenery, clothing ... are usually faithfully depicted
 - given the centrality of this genre within the CAN for Balkans project, I will elaborate upon this in 3.2
- **Horror comics**
 - very relevant here are of course many the vampire-themed comics
 - see, a.o., 7.2
- **Humoristic comics**
 - comics conceived to make the reader laugh
 - the in Belgium very successful family comics are partially humoristic (cf. supra)
 - of specific interest is Dutchman Hanco Kolk's 2017 'Tulpen uit Istanboel' ('Tulips from Istanbul') an homage album to the Belgian *Spirou* series in which the protagonists travel from Istanbul through the Balkans, ironically alluding to several Balkan clichés



- **Knight comics**
 - for a Balkan-related example, see 5.2
- **Newspaper comics**
 - cf., e.g., 4.1
- **Photo comics**
 - use photographs instead of (drawn) illustrations for the images, together with word balloons and other typical comics conventions
- **Promotional comics**
 - comics created in order to give extra attention to a brand, a company etc.
- **Religious comics**
 - these religion-themed comics often are biographies of historical saints, popes and other important religious persons, e.g., Évrard & Koch 2020
- **Science-fiction comics**
 - sometimes alternate history (cf. 3.2.3) is considered a type of SF comics
- **Small-press comics**
 - self-published comics by amateur comics authors, usually in very small numbers

- **Soccer comics**
 - comics featuring (fictional) soccer players and their adventures

- **Sword and sorcery comics**
 - see 'Fantasy'

- **Underground comics**
 - though not really of the underground-type themselves, but certainly worth noticing here is the non-Belgian example of American underground artist Robert Crumb's comics about his trip during the sixties in communist Bulgaria (Milkova 2021)

- **Western comics**
 - although the action normally takes place in the (West of the) USA, characters may be (originating from) South East European emigrants
 - cf. Van Hamme & Berthet 2021

3.2 Historical comics and their subtypes

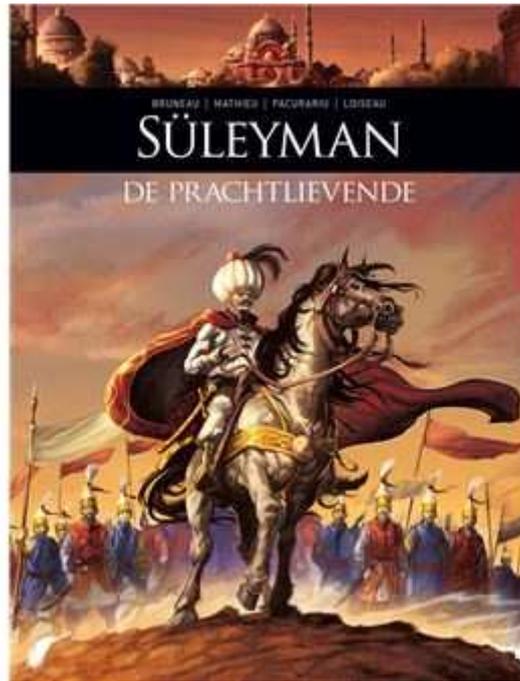
History can take many forms in comics (cf. De Dobbeleer 2013). On the basis of the *historicity* of the depicted events we can divide between 3 subtypes: nonfiction, historical fiction and alternate history.

- Since history is omnipresent in many long(er)-standing (sub)genres (see 3.1) overlap with these genres is inescapable. If, however, comics of other genres do not offer any comment on our past or present, they may be excluded from the historical genre.
- Several criteria can be used to classify the mass of historical comics, the most obvious of which is the epoch in which the depicted events take place. More fundamental, however, is the historicity of the shaped universe, and the degree of referentiality will therefore function as my standard to discuss the three major subtypes:

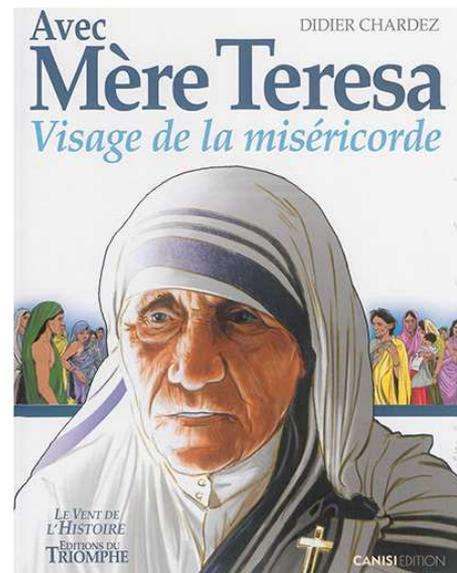
3.2.1 Nonfiction

- Theoretically, in nonfictional comics and graphic novels all (significant) characters are historical
 - This implies that most of their story lines can be traced back – ‘verified’ – in history or reference books.
 - often the peritext¹⁹ contains information (and maps) provided by academic historians
 - e.g., in the Franco-Belgian Glénat series *Ils ont fait l’Histoire*

¹⁹ With *peritext*, one of the many terms introduced by the French literary scholar Gérard Genette (1930-2018), I refer to the pages preceding or following those of the actual comics story (Genette would say: of the literary text). Often, one reads *paratext* instead of *peritext*, however – for Genette – *paratext* was in fact the broader, umbrella term for his more specific concepts of *peritext* and *épitexte* (the texts, such as reviews, which are external to the work at hand). As Genette himself formulated it: “pour les amateurs de formules, *paratexte* = *péritexte* + *épitexte*” (1987: 11).



- In spite of all its opponents (the German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham being the most notorious), the appeal of the comics medium to young children has always been employed to instruct them in, among other subjects, their national or world history.
 - cf. the educative and ideological purposes of such (hi)stories
- Esp. in the beginning, the style of these (educational) works was (rigidly) realist style
 - this realism may now be abandoned somewhat, since ideally their aim should be more than merely instructive instruction (esp. if not for children in particular)
- Apart from notable historical events, the lives of famous people are also a favoured subject in this first category. To persons as diverse as Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (cf. supra), Ludwig van Beethoven, Isadora Duncan, Anne Frank, Malcolm X, Lev Trotsky and the Balkan-born Mother Theresa (Chardez 2016) have been devoted graphic biographies drawn in various styles (e.g., the Edu-Manga series narrated by Astro Boy).



- A ‘danger’ to which these works are exposed – and the reason why they often receive lukewarm reviews – consists in offering too many facts at the expense of a satisfying plot, in other words: that they are too much history, too little ‘story’.
- Especially in recent years, history in graphic novels is often mediated by an autobiographical narrator, who in some way or other is to be identified with the artist whose name appears on the cover (e.g., the history of Iran in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000-2003), or, of 20th-century Turkey in Özge Samancı’s *Dare to Disappoint*, 2015)
 - The interweaving of individual experiences – and personal linguistic and graphic styles – with recent history inspiringly challenges the actual notion of nonfiction. The presence of an ‘(eye)witness’ emphasizes the near impossibility to reconstruct the historical ‘truth’ (cf. De Dobbeleer 2018).
 - Of course, this booming subgenre is limited to contemporary events, the outcome of which the artists seldom know themselves.
 - a specific, recently acclaimed subgenre within this category is graphic journalism
 - its most famous ‘practitioner’, the Maltese-American Joe Sacco has authored several renowned Balkan- (Bosnian- / former Yugoslavia-) related works (2003, 2005, 2011).

3.2.2 Historical fiction

- probably the largest group of historical comics worldwide
- Evidently, comics / graphic novels of this type are less bound by historical facts than the nonfictional (3.2.1).
 - **(1)** Here, the main character(s) and even the very plot line may be entirely invented, as long as the setting (and often some particular characters) is

historical. Like in historical novels, it is the interaction between a (fictional) hero – whom we get to know while turning the pages, or whom we already know from previous issues – and historical characters, events, laws, customs ... that attracts readers interested in the past.

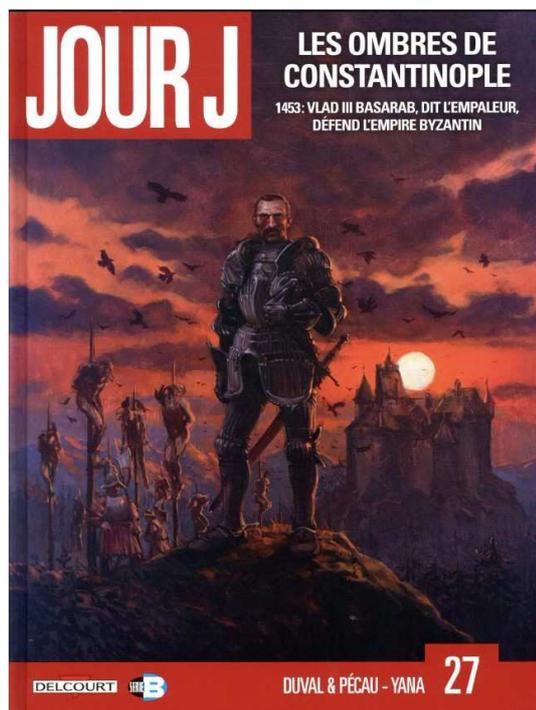
- E.g., Italian Hugo Pratt's well-known ('Franco-Belgian-style') sailor Corto Maltese is able to meet, join with or fight, during his wanderings, against historical figures (e.g., of the Russian Revolution, in *Corto Maltese in Siberia*, 1975).
 - Through their actions, such heroes seem to affect the historical events in which they become entangled; as a matter of fact, however, the artist will normally not let them change the *course* of history (then, it would be *alternate* history, see 3.2.3).
- Another well-known example is the humoristic (French) *Astérix* series by René Goscinny & Albert Uderzo, and now (after their respective deaths) continued by other writers and artists
 - Just like many Dutchmen regret that Astérix and Obélix, during their adventures, have not yet visited what are now the Netherlands (think about cheese, tulips, and other clichés), Balkan peoples might consider it a pity that the brave Gauls have not yet been to the Balkans either.
 - Yet, those (comics fans from the Balkans) considering this a pity must certainly be of the opinion that nations and countries nowadays in certain cases should be willing to 'embrace the clichés' about themselves (cf. 7.5)
- **(2)** On the other hand, the protagonist may be historical her-/himself, like in nonfiction, but here we will see her/him involved in (partially) invented, supplementary events, which *could* have been happened (again, without affecting canonical history). Evidently, such historical protagonists, for their part, can interact with fictional characters.
 - e.g., Dilios in Frank Miller's *300* (1998), about the Balkan (avant la lettre)-situated Battle of Thermopylae [L1: Ancient Greek legacy].
- **(3)** Historical characters, furthermore, may remain totally absent. In this case, still more than in (1) and (2), the way in which the invented characters behave and are conditioned by the past allows the artist to give his unconstrained view on how life has been in that period.
 - The corresponding image of history can be romanticized,
 - e.g.; Hal Foster's medieval *Prince Valiant* (1937-; featuring several *legendary* characters),
 - but it may just as well be an indictment which transcends the time portrayed.

- e.g., Jacques Tardi efficiently put this into practice regarding the pointlessness of war in *It Was the War of the Trenches* (*C'était la guerre des tranchées*, 1993), his historically very precise First-World-War evocation, in which no character directly reminds us of concrete historical actors.
- **(4)** A particular kind of (adventure / science fiction) comics books are so-called time-travelling adventures.
 - The time machine, one of the comics medium's most notorious devices, allows for more than one historical period to be represented in one and the same adventure.²⁰
 - The protagonists, usually fictional, regularly encounter and interact with historical figures. However, it is usually not within the protagonists' power/willingness to change the course of history (for this I refer to 3.2.3).

3.2.3 Alternate history

- During the creative process, practically all authors of historical comics have to omit, add and/or slightly distort the elements or story lines found in reference books about the past. Understandable as they are, such interventions serve the readability of the historical genre. If, on the other hand, the artist makes (one of) his characters substantially divert the course of history, or depicts a (near) past which must be the result of a crucial event or decision that never took place in real history – the so-called *point of divergence* –, s/he is practicing *alternate history* (*uchronia*):
 - a Franco-Belgian-Serbian example taking place on the Balkans is *Les ombres de Constantinople* (Duval, Pécau & Yana 2017) about Albanian and Romanian historical figures Skanderbeg and Vlad Țepeș cooperate against the plans of Sultan Mehmet II to conquer Constantinople.

²⁰ The very nature of the comics medium aptly allows for less incredible time traveling, too. Discussing a.o. Art Spiegelman's acclaimed *Maus* – actually nonfiction, but hard to subsume under any category –, Hillary Chute has drawn attention to “what the comics form makes possible for nonfiction narrative, especially [...] the ability of comics to spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page” (2008: 452-453).



LE CONCEPT

Et si l'Histoire avait pris un cap différent de celui que nous connaissons ? Et si les Russes avaient réussi à marcher sur la Lune avant les Américains ? Et si l'épicentre de la guerre froide s'était trouvé à Paris et non à Berlin ? Et si l'attentat de Dallas avait eu lieu en 1973 et non en 1963 ? Et si l'Allemagne avait gagné la Première Guerre mondiale ? Et si l'imagination avait pris le pouvoir en mai 68 ? Et si les anarchistes avaient renversé le tsar Nicolas II en 1917 ? Tous ces récits, fondés sur des faits historiques et des hypothèses réalistes, nous amènent à découvrir les conséquences de ce jour où tout a basculé : le **JOUR J**.

L'ALBUM

Mai 1453, 100 000 Turcs sous le commandement du sultan Mehmet II le Conquérant assiègent Constantinople. Derrière les murs de la deuxième Rome, 5 000 combattants se préparent à défendre chèrement leur vie. La Ville n'a jamais été conquise, mais cette fois seule une intervention des armées chrétiennes pourrait renverser la situation...

LE HÉROS

Iakander, janissaire déserteur d'origine albanaise, se lie d'amitié avec Vlad Basarab de la dynastie des Drăculea, prince de Valachie. Ensemble, ils vont devoir livrer un combat sans merci pour défendre Constantinople des Ottomans. Mais à force de combattre le tigre, ne devient-on pas tigre soi-même ?

- Potentially much more playful than nonfiction and historical fiction, alternate history can offer surprisingly keen and original visions ('what if...?') on the mechanisms and futile coincidences of human history.
 - This kind of comics raises particular challenges for the artist because the alternate story world should, on the one hand, (at times; not really the case in Duval, Pécau & Yana 2017) be more or less different from ours, but coherent as in real history, on the other

4. The Representation of the Balkans in Belgian Comics Before the Cold War

4.1 Before 'King Ottokar's Sceptre'?

Though not sequential (and thus – for many comics theorists – not 'real' comics), socially critical, satirical (newspaper) cartoons sometimes dealt with political developments in the Balkans.

- a non-Belgian example is 'The Boiling Point' by Leonard Raven-Hill, 1912 (in the British *Punch* magazine), in the time of the Balkan Wars:

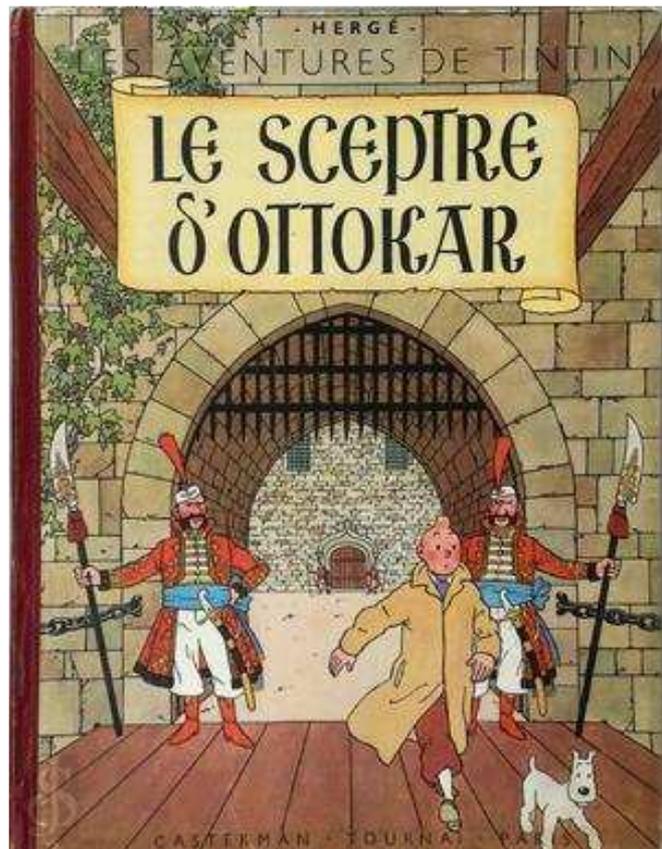


Caption: *The Boiling Point*, Leonard Raven-Hill, 1912.

- one can easily discern the powder-keg metaphor, and more specifically image [G]: European powers' meddling into the region

4.2 Case study 1: Hergé's 'King Ottokar's Sceptre' (*Tintin* #8)

With his eighth *Tintin* album, 'King Ottokar's Sceptre', the giant of Belgian – some even say, 'of European' - comics, Hergé (pseudonym of Georges Remi, 1907-1983) introduced a fictitious 'Balkan universe' whose shadow would fall for a long time to come on future generations of (Belgian) comics authors who set their adventures in the Balkans.



4.2.1 Title and summary

- the current album title, 'Le sceptre d'Ottokar' (in the English translation: 'King Ottokar's Sceptre') was not the original one
 - just like the seven preceding adventures, it was originally serialised (weekly) in *Le Petit Vingtième* (*The Little Twentieth*), the children's supplement of the newspaper *Le Vingtième Siècle* (*The Twentieth Century*), namely from 4 August, 1938 to 10 August, 1939, under the title 'Tintin en Syldavie' ('Tintin in Syldavia')
- summary (almost completely taken from the much-recommended *Wikipedia* synopsis):
 - Having discovered a lost briefcase in a Belgian park, Tintin returns it to its owner, the sigillographer Professor Hector Alembick, who informs the reporter of his plans to travel to the Balkan nation of Syldavia. Tintin discovers agents spying on the professor and follows those responsible to a nearby

Syldavian restaurant. An unknown man agrees to meet with Tintin but is found unconscious and appears to have amnesia. Shortly after, Tintin receives a threatening note and is then the target of a bomb attack; he survives the latter when police detectives Thomson and Thompson intercept the bomb. Suspecting that these events are linked to Syldavia, Tintin decides to accompany Professor Alembick on his forthcoming visit to the country. On the plane journey there, Tintin notices Alembick acting out of character, and suspects that an imposter has replaced him. Reading a brochure on Syldavian history, Tintin theorizes that the imposter is part of a plot to steal the sceptre of the medieval king Ottokar IV from the current King Muskar XII before St. Vladimir's Day, thus forcing him to abdicate.

Forcibly ejected from the plane by the pilot, Tintin survives and informs local police of his fears regarding the plot. However, the police captain is part of the conspiracy, and he organizes an ambush in the woods where Tintin will be eliminated. Tintin evades death, and heads to the capital city of Klow in a car carrying the opera singer Bianca Castafiore (who has her first appearance in the *Tintin* series here). Leaving the car to evade Castafiore's singing, Tintin is arrested and survives another assassination attempt before heading to Klow on foot. Arriving in the city, he meets the King's aide-de-camp, Colonel Boris Jorgen, and warns him of the plot. However, Jorgen is also a conspirator and organizes a further unsuccessful assassination attempt aimed at Tintin. Meanwhile, the imposter pretending to be Alembick is allowed into Kropow Castle, where the sceptre is kept. Tintin finally succeeds in personally warning the king about the plot and they both rush to Kropow Castle, only to find that the sceptre is missing.

With the aid of Thomson and Thompson, who have recently arrived in Syldavia, Tintin discovers how the conspirators smuggled out the sceptre from the castle and pursues the thieves, first by car and then by foot across the mountains. He is able to prevent the sceptre being carried over the border into neighbouring Borduria, discovering a letter on one of the conspirators. It reveals that the plot has been orchestrated by Müssler, a political agitator who runs the Syldavian Iron Guard, or Zyldav Zentral Revoluzionär Komitzät (ZZRK), and who intends to stir up unrest in Syldavia, thereby allowing Borduria to invade and annex the country. Entering Borduria, Tintin commandeers a fighter plane and heads to Klow, but the Syldavian military shoot him down. Parachuting, he continues to Klow on foot, returning the sceptre to the King on St. Vladimir's Day and thus securing the monarchy. In return, the king makes Tintin a Knight of the Order of the Golden Pelican; the first foreigner to receive this particular honour. Tintin later learns that the imposter was Alembick's twin brother after police arrest Müssler and rescue the actual professor Alembick.

4.2.2 Background and Balkan allusions

- Overall, albeit with a fictitious setting, the adventure refers to historical events, though (apparently) *not* directly allude to historical events in the Balkans.
 - Hergé got his historical inspiration rather through the events in and around Nazi Germany, namely from Hitler's *Anschluss*, Germany's annexation of the of Austria in March 1938 and later that year of Sudetenland (in the current Czech Republic)
 - cf. the *Heinkel* fighter plane in which Tintin escapes Borduria (Van Opstal 1994)
 - hence the parallel between Borduria and Nazi Germany
 - cf. the name of the agitator leading the Syldavian Iron Guard, Müsstler (derived from *Mussolini & Hitler*)
 - however, on the other hand, a parallel between Syldavia and Austria would be less convincing, first of all because of the many 'Balkan clues' within the text itself
- Syldavia has been associated with several specific Balkan countries:
 - with Albania
 - by Hergé himself, according to his biographer Pierre Assouline (1996: 144)
 - in April 1939, Mussolini-led Italy would invade and annex Albania
 - with Romania
 - by Dodo Niță (2014: passim and infra)
 - e.g., Romania had an Iron Guard too, but Niță offers several other convincing arguments to let Syldavia coincide with his homeland
- however, it is probably more fruitful (even according to Hergé, cf. also Assouline 1996: 144) to consider Syldavia more generally as a metaphor for any unspecified Balkan country
 - and for that matter: to consider the Bordurian coup as a threat that could come from any totalitarian regime, of course, a very timely topic in those years
- of key importance is the tourist brochure (Hergé 1997: 19-21) which Tintin reads in the plane between Frankfurt and Prague, situating Syldavia in Eastern Europe, bordering the sea [from the English version]:

SYLDAVIA

THE KINGDOM OF THE BLACK PELICAN

AMONG the many enchanting places which deservedly attract foreign visitors with a love for picturesque ceremony and colourful folklore, there is one small country which, although relatively unknown, surpasses many others in interest. Isolated until modern times because of its inaccessible position, this country is now served by a regular air-line network, which brings it within the reach of all who love unspoiled beauty, the proverbial hospitality of a peasant people, and the charm of medieval customs which still survive despite the march of progress.

This is Syldavia.

Syldavia is a small country in Eastern Europe, comprising two great valleys: those of the river Vladir, and its tributary, the Moltus. The rivers meet at Klow, the capital (122,000 inhabitants). These valleys are flanked by wide plateaux covered with forests, and are surrounded by high, snow-capped mountains. In the fertile Syldavian plains are corn-lands and cattle pastures. The subsoil is rich in minerals of all kinds.

Numerous thermal and sulphur springs gush from the earth, the chief centres being at Klow (cardiac diseases) and Kragoniedin (rheumatic complaints).

The total population is estimated to be 642,000 inhabitants.

Syldavia exports wheat, mineral-water from Klow, firewood, horses and violinists.



- the only European country in which pelicans live in nature is Romania (Niță's "ornothological argument", 2014: 17), but the blackness of the bird in question may also refer to Albania's flag





- Via the brochure, the reader knowing the Brussels [i.e., a Flemish] dialect learns that the language of Syldavia used to be 'Germanic':
 - “Eih bennek, eih blavek” (1997: 21) is Brussels dialect for ‘I am here, I stay here’
 - however, further on (1997: 25), one bumps into a sign on a police station (‘gendarmerie’) clearly showing Cyrillic letters: “ГЕНДАРМАСКАИА” (transliterated: “GENDARMASKAIA”)²¹

²¹ Or do we have to do with so-called pseudo-Cyrillic (cf. De Dobbeleer 2021b).



- the Cyrillic alphabet, at that time, was not in use anymore in Romania or Albania, whereas it was and still *is* in use in the Balkans, namely in the Orthodox *Slavic* countries (esp. Bulgaria, Serbia, North Macedonia, and to a lesser degree: Montenegro, which nowadays is virtually ‘digraphic’)
- this use of Cyrillic, though, does not appear to be consistent
- Since the originals had been lost (and later stolen; Goddin 2008: 351), new drawings had to be made for the *coloured* album edition (1947).
 - It was Hergé’s collaborator, Edgar P. Jacobs,²² who prompted him to render the backgrounds and costumes more in the style of the Balkans (Thompson 1991: 70; Lofficier & Lofficier 2011).
 - the Syldavian Royal Guards, for example, were ‘redressed’ from British ‘Beefeaters’ to guards resembling the national guard of Bulgaria (cf.; cf. supra: brochure fragment)

²² Famous for his – then already running – comics series *Les Aventures de Blake et Mortimer* (1946-).

4.2.3 Analyzing a panel with the 'imagological parameters'

It cannot, of course, be the purpose of this 'documentation' to present an exhaustive imagological analysis of an entire comics adventure, let alone one that has been (almost) entirely associated with the Balkans.

- To give an idea of the operability of the above-discussed parameters, I will describe/typify one panel from Tintin's 'King Ottokar's Sceptre'.
 - Let us return to the already quickly discussed large panel on p. 25
 - since it occupies two complete strips (the second and third out of four), its size certainly says something about the importance (albeit 'only' with regard to setting the mood / creating the atmosphere



- One can more or less easily discern / indicate Balkan images (1.3):
 - mountainous, difficult to penetrate, isolated ... [A]
 - see the mountains in the background
 - historical-cultural 'border zone' [D]
 - the fact that the Balkans are a border zone between Christianity and Islam is symbolized – as would often be the case in Belgian comics later on – by the Ottoman-type minarets, still typical of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina
 - admittedly, one cannot see any churches, whether Orthodox or Catholic, but the Western(-looking) uniforms of the officers of the *gendarmaskaia* will

- probably have made the reader think, esp. in that period, that they are Christian
- European powers' meddling into the region [G]
 - (although he does not officially represent a European power) Tintin's very presence in fact already points to such meddling, however welcome it may turn out to be for the Syldavians in the end
 - Arguably, as for the Balkan character stereotypes (2.1), the panel can be considered to refer to:
 - primitive [psBp 1]
 - in comparison to Tintin's and the officers' clothes, those of the Syldavians look more primitive
 - passionate (impassioned) [psBp 3]
 - proud [psBp 5]
 - brave [psBp 6]
 - honourable [psBp 7]
 - these positive qualities [psBp 3, 5-7] could all be ascribed to the Syldavian in the doorway
 - close-knit (within their communities) [psBp 9]
 - backward [nsBp 1]
 - uncultured [nsBp 2]
 - primitive [nsBp 3]
 - intriguing [nsBp 7]
 - violent [nsBp 9]
 - passionate [nsBp 10]
 - the two-pronged hay fork in the hands of the peasant on Tintin's right-hand side reminds (me) of typical depictions of peasant revolutions
 - Among the historical legacies (2.3) 'at work' we can point to:
 - the Slavic legacy [L7]
 - because of the Cyrillic letters (cf. supra)
 - the Ottoman legacy [L12]
 - the (Sunni) Muslim legacy [L13]
 - the Habsburg legacy [L14]
 - to whom else could those western-looking officers' uniforms be attributed?
 - cf. Habsburg as the symbol of the urge for endless regulation in order to master the Western Balkan peoples
 - as in the second half of Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina* (*Na Drini ćuprija*, 1945)

5. The Representation of the Balkans in Belgian Comics During the Cold War

5.1. Whither the Balkans during the Cold War?

(cf. 1.3-1.4) unclear status / knowledge in the West about 'how' communist / USSR-dominated the Balkans were (cf. Yugoslavia's 'third way', Albania's relations with China, Ceaușescu's so-called maverick position)

- for evocations of 'life behind the Iron Curtain' writers/artists and readers/audiences rather turned to / thought about Soviet Russian (and sometimes Polish, Czechoslovak) settings

in 1949:

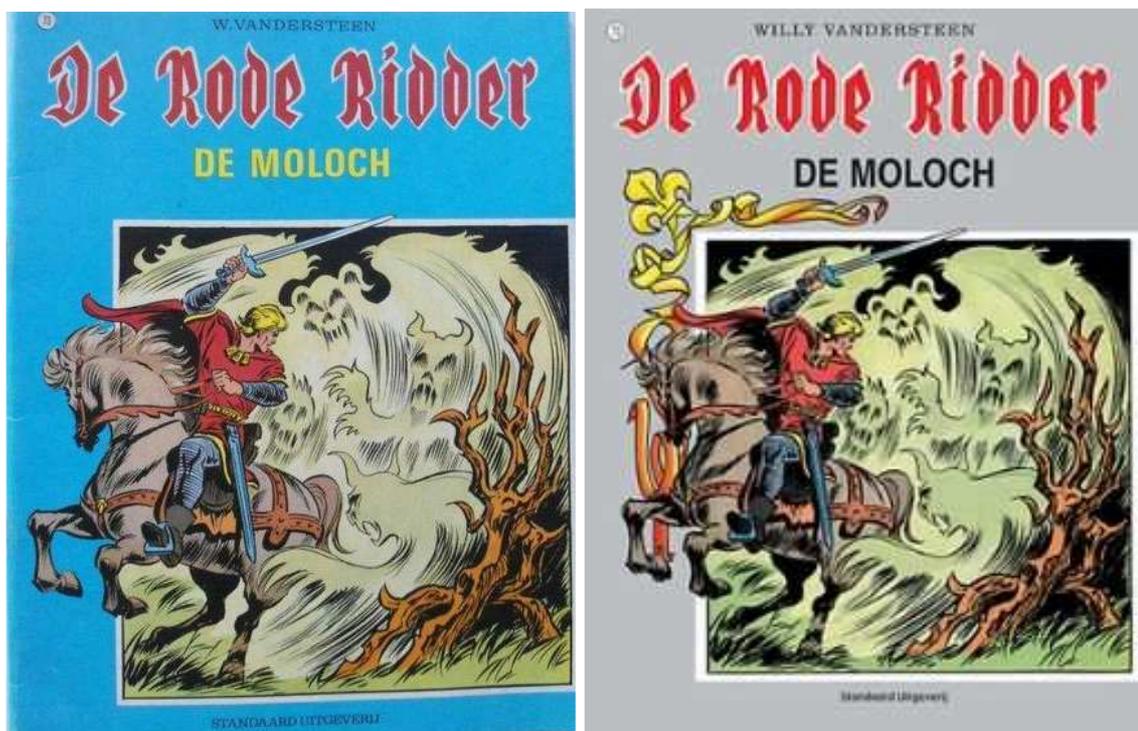
- a French censorship law on publications for the youth forbade to cause image damage to existing countries (Ratier in Charlier & Tacq 2017: 8)
 - French censorship laws had a great impact on the Belgian comics scene
 - also with regard to the depiction in comics of women
 - that's also why authors – in line with Hergé's great Syldavia example – chose for (names of) fictitious countries when setting their stories on the Balkans, such as
 - Braslavie
 - Bulderije
 - Chocowakije
 - see paradigm 7.1

5.2 Case study 2: Willy Vandersteen 'De moloch' (*De Rode Ridder* #73)

During the Cold War, the Balkans now and then functioned as the backdrop in Belgian comics adventures thematizing the nuclear threat, e.g., Pom's 'Buldaarse Rhapsodie' (1954; see Pom 2020):

- the settings were usually clearly influenced by Hergé's Syldavia and Borduria (cf. the Ruritanian paradigm, 7.1)
- apart from some Balkan elements, the antagonists can be more or less identified with the Soviet structures and 'practices'

At the same time, escaping the Cold War threat, a medieval Balkan atmosphere was evoked in comics that relied on knightly adventures. Here, the Balkans were considered the uncanny location where mysterious, frightening things happen, as Bram Stoker in his *Dracula* (1897) had brought them to the West European reader.



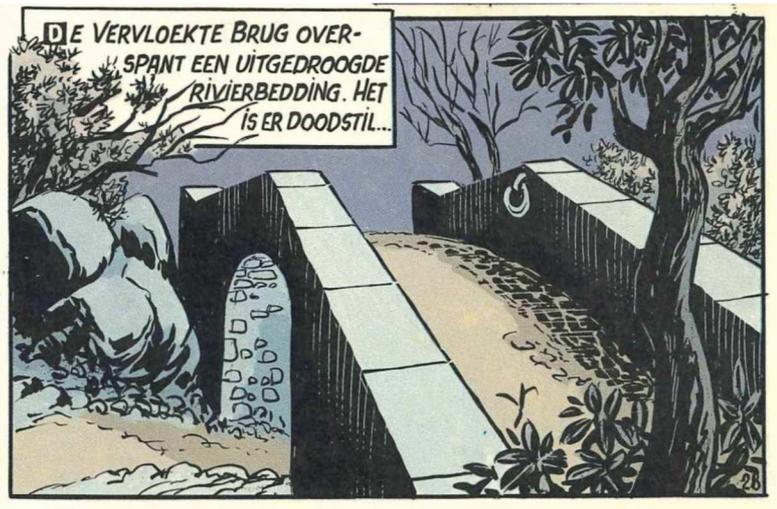
left: the original black-and-white version (with the typically blue cover; 1973); right: the coloured version (with the typically silver-coloured cover) I made use of (1989)

- Willy Vandersteen's Flemish classic comics series *De Rode Ridder* (*The Red Knight*, 1959-) started as a typical comics with (Arthurian) knights, but from 1969 onwards, when the busy Vandersteen had left the work on the series to Karel Biddeloo, the series would become more and more indebted to the fantasy and sword and sorcery genres.
 - A case in point is 'De moloch' ('The Moloch', *De Rode Ridder* #73, 1977)
 - "A rove of the Red Knight through the wooded mountains of the Balkans ...", thus begins this 73rd *De Rode Ridder* album.



- Throughout the 34-page story, the ever brave protagonist, Johan (the Red Knight), successfully manages to cope with the mysterious threat, in a local village, of the Moloch and rescues yet another damsel in distress: the beautiful Ozelia.
- The "wooded mountains of the Balkans" [Balkan image 1] serve as an excellent setting for this adventure,
 - it could just as easily have taken place anywhere else in the Red Knight's vast field of action (pretty much the entire Old World), but the term 'Balkans' immediately gives it the intended atmosphere: the specific mix of exoticism, inhospitality and romance that is allegedly typical of this rugged region
 - the Belgian readers were/are generally aware that the Balkans are still on their continent, but the region is for most of them far enough removed to be sufficiently 'excitingly indefinable'.
 - The fact that 'Moloch' as an idol has mainly to do with the Old Testament and little or nothing with South-Eastern Europe does not really matter to the reader.
 - On the other hand, in 'The Moloch' Biddeloo alludes unmistakably to the motif of the building sacrifice²³ that is widespread in the Balkans: the beauty to be sacrificed, Ozelia, is chained to a Balkan bridge (called the 'Cursed Bridge') that is quite easily recognisable in architectural terms.

²³ See also *The Bridge on the Drina* (cf. supra), where the winner of the 1961 Nobel Prize in Literature, Ivo Andrić, several times (ironically) alludes to this motif/superstition.



- In any case, the medieval Balkans seem to be the perfect setting for an isolated mountain village where human sacrifices are made to a terrifying creature called 'Moloch'.
- Needless to say in a comics album like this: at the end Johan, the Red Knight, can leave the village in search of new adventures. Peace has returned to the nameless Balkan village. The uncanny power has been broken.
 - Thanks to Johan, the many young Balkan girls who had been exposed – before Ozelia – to the curse of the Moloch all return to their (now again) merry village (together with the many men of the village who before Johan's arrival had – in vain – tried to fight the Moloch), as can be seen on the album's last page (1989: strips 133-135):



▼ ANUIT DE BERGEN NADERT EEN GROEP BEELDSCHONE VROUWEN, GEVOLGD DOOR TALRIJKE MANNEN IN WAPENRUSTING.



◉ ZELIA KAN HAAR BROERS IN DE ARMEN SLUITEN...

Dit alles hebben we aan jou te danken, Johan! Vergezel je ons naar het dorp, om het goede nieuws te melden?



◻ DIE AVOND WORDT DE BEVRIJDING VAN EEN EEUWENOUDE VLOEK UITBUNDIG GEVIERT.

Jedereen kan nu onbezorgd de toekomst tegemoet zien! Niets houdt me nog hier!

◉ P DE WEG DOOR HET WOOD WUIFT VARAZDIN DE RIDDER EEN LAATSTE

- apart from the clearly positive Balkan people stereotype 'close-knit (within their communities)' [psBp 9], one also notices how the village's architecture (and the knights' outfit) rather refers to the Christian and maybe Wallachian (than to the Ottoman, Muslim) historical legacies (see 2.3)
 - and thus, if you want, to the homelands of the uncanny Balkan figure *par excellence*: Dracula

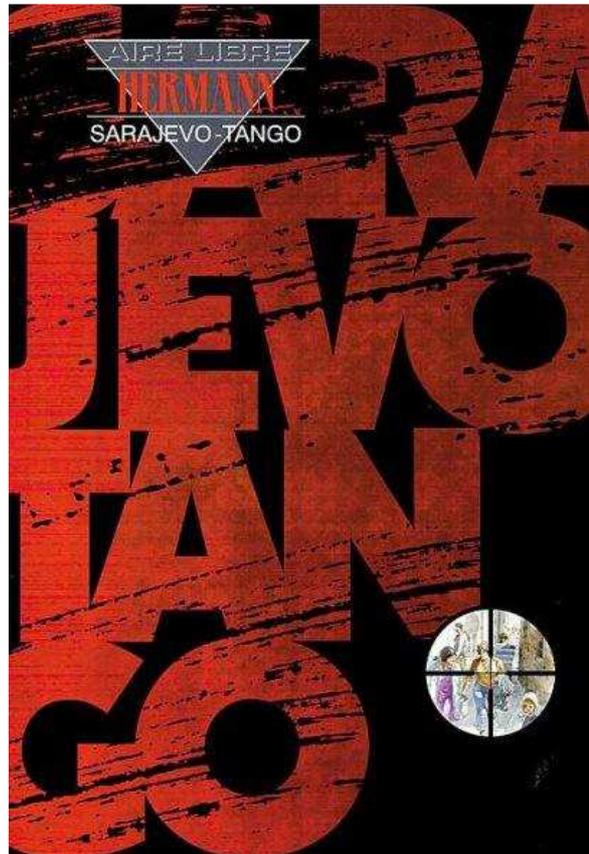
6. The Representation of the Balkans in Belgian Comics After the Cold War

6.1 The impact of the Fall of Communism and the Yugoslav Wars on Belgian comics about the Balkans

- if many people of the former Eastern Bloc (had always) wanted to be Western (or at least anti-Soviet), how much did they differ from 'us', Western (Belgian) comics authors / people in general?
 - and what had been the polarizing role of the West during communism – and in the past in general?
 - esp. in author's comics / graphic novels, treating Eastern Europe in comics was now more and more a way to look at the role of the West during the (many conflicts of the) past
- (cf. 1.4.2:) the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), though geographically limited to the so-called Western Balkans, revived/intensified the older Balkan images [cf. supra]
 - at the same time they functioned as a catalyst to shatter/discuss the stereotypes and stereotypical thinking (along with the changing Zeitgeist)
- Eastern Europe and the Balkans as a mirror to ask oneself awkward questions about historical roles and (geo)political relations → paradigm of the mirror (cf. 7.5)

6.2 Case study 3: Hermann's *Sarajevo-Tango*

In 1995, in remarkably quick response to the events in former Yugoslavia, the Walloon comics author Hermann (pseudonym of Hermann Huppen, 1938-), winner of the highly prestigious Grand Prix de la ville d'Angoulême (2016), published his 56-page one-shot *Sarajevo-Tango* (in the mature readers-oriented Dupuis collection *Aire libre* [Free Area]).



- on the surface, this obvious author's work (cf. 3.1), tells the fictional story of one Svonko Duprez, a mercenary who has been hired to retrieve the daughter of a rich client from besieged Sarajevo
- starting with a black-and-white page (the other pages are coloured) featuring the grave of Yugoslavia, the album should be seen as Hermann's personal indictment of the Civil War ravaging in former Yugoslavia
 - and esp. by the sordid role in it by the hypocritical, two-faced Western powers (and media)

Halst, 28 X 2012



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- the wolves usher in the work's grim – potentially uncanny – atmosphere
- that *Sarajevo-tango* can or rather should be read as an indictment is evident from the peritext, more specifically the front matter

- a note from the publisher that this book (actually a graphic novel in a Franco-Belgian comics album-format) is sent to a long series of people occupying all kinds of high European / NATO etc. positions (Hermann 1995: 1)
- a foreword by Hermann (1995: 4), in which he tells the reader about what happened to his Bosnian friend Ervin Rustemagić, the well-known Bosnian comics publisher, distributor, and rights agent, during the war and how this (a.o.) led to the creation of this personal work

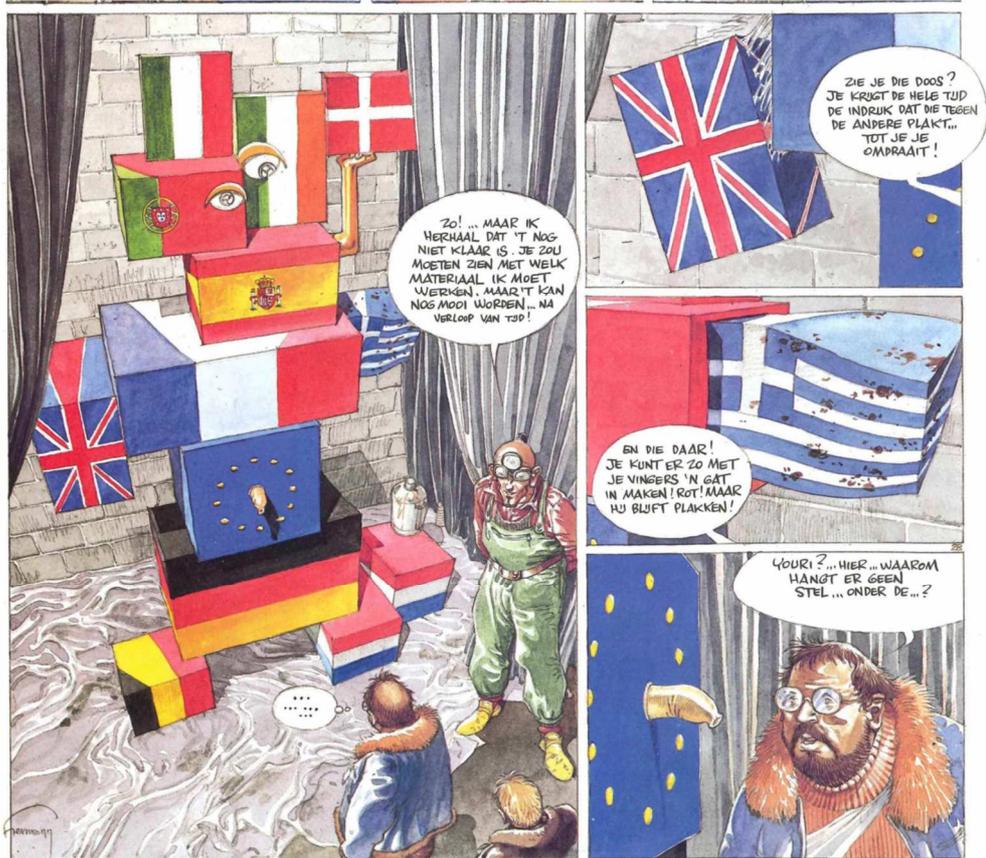


Hermann (1995: 10)

- the tango in the title stands for high UN officials dancing the tango and reminding how the West easily allowed Hitler to invade Czechoslovakia, cf. already 4.2.2



- no (Euro-)Orientalizing here: Sarajevo appears in this panel (1995: 16) as a grey, ugly, heavily bombarded anonymous city



- whereas the UN Blue Helmets (L17) are depicted, in *Sarajevo-tango*, with Smurf caps instead of helmets, the EU legacy (L18) is thematised and ridiculed here (1995: 32) by means of this questionable piece of 'art' (without 'balls')

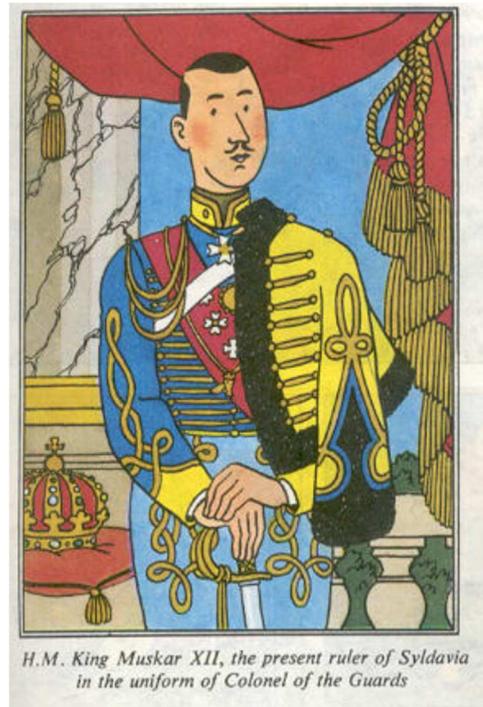
7. Conclusion: Five Balkan Paradigms

The ways in which the Balkans have been dealt with throughout the history of Belgian comics can – in my view – be recapitulated by means of five (what I will call) paradigms: those of the Ruritanian, the uncanny, the backward-exotic (Euro-Oriental realist), the documentary and the mirroring Balkans.

7.1 The Ruritanian Balkans

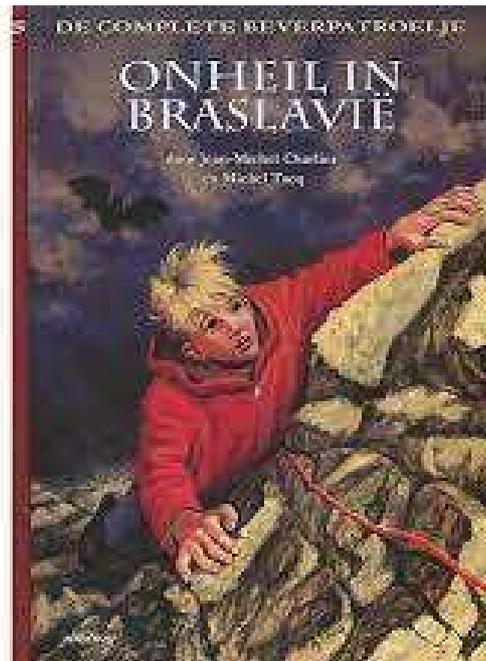
Entirely influenced by Hergé's *Tintin* album 'King Ottokar's Sceptre', this paradigm allows comics authors to introduce fictitious Balkan (or at least East-Central European) countries as the setting for their politically-driven adventure plots.

- I could have coined this paradigm 'the Syldavian Balkans', but since it has in fact a kind of predecessor in popular literary fiction – namely Ruritania, in Anthony Hope's 1894 *The Prisoner of Zenda* – I prefer the adjective 'Ruritanian' to indicate that it is a paradigm that can be found 'beyond' comics too.
- As it is 'natural' in adventure plots (for children), evil is overcome near the end. The schemers are eliminated and/or punished and, if possible, a local monarchy is restored or secured. (After all, Belgium too has a king!)



- examples of such countries are:
 - Braslavie
 - Charlier & MiTacq [= Michel Tacq], 'La couronne cachée' (*La Patrouille des Castors* #13, 1964; originally 'La couronne sacrée'; see Charlier & Tacq 2017: 19-66)

- Charlier & MiTacq, 'Le chaudron du diable' (*La Patrouille des Castors* #14, 1964-1965; see Charlier & Tacq 2017: 67-114)

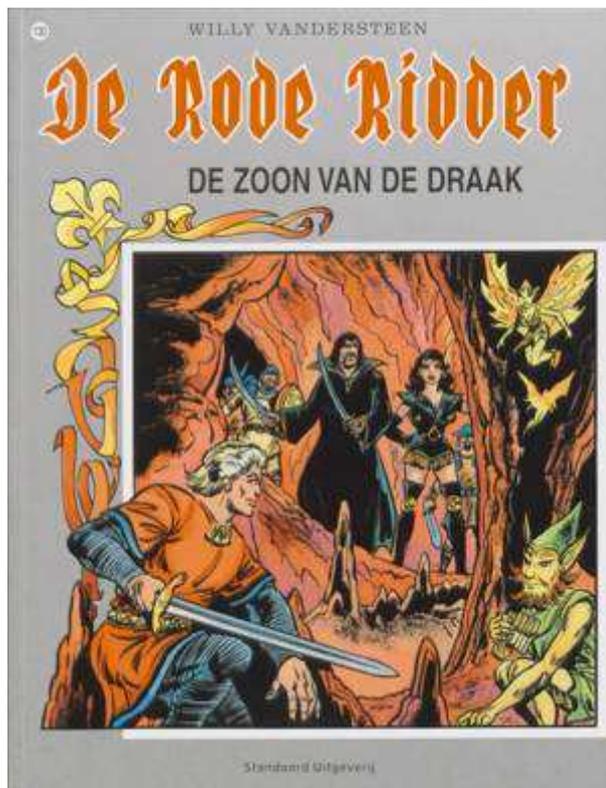


- Bulderije
 - Pom (pseudonym of the Flemish Jozef Van Hove), 'Buldaarse rhapsodie'. *Piet Pienter en Bert Bibber* #9 (1954; in Pom 2020: 193-247)
- Chocowakije
 - Vandersteen
- Moerenië
 - Vandersteen

7.2 The uncanny Balkans

Whereas the former and oldest paradigm is connected to Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda*, this second paradigm has its origins in that other, slightly younger English-language novel that has proved fundamental with regard to the Western image of the Balkans: Irishman Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

- of course, comics featuring vampires are likely to situate them (or at least their land of origin) in the Balkans
- but this paradigm unites all comics 'using' the Balkans as a suitable setting for adventure plots driven and/or spiced by supernatural phenomena
 - comics authors locate their adventures precisely there, because of the Balkans' well-known (since Stoker's *Dracula*) uncanny atmosphere
 - because of the supernatural 'aspect' of this paradigm, it is likely to be applied in sword and sorcery series
 - in 5.2 we already dwelled on *De Rode Ridder's* 'De moloch', but the series also features a younger album, full of supernatural narrative elements, in which a very evil "Vlad Drakul" himself is the main antagonist: 'De zoon van de draak' ('The son of the dragon'; *De Rode Ridder* #130; Vandersteen 1989b)

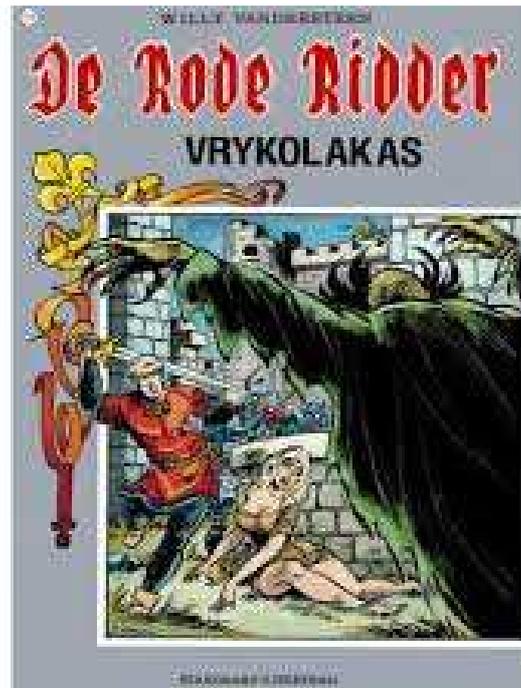


Vandersteen's name appears on the cover, although here again sword and sorcery lover Karel Biddeloo was the writer and artist

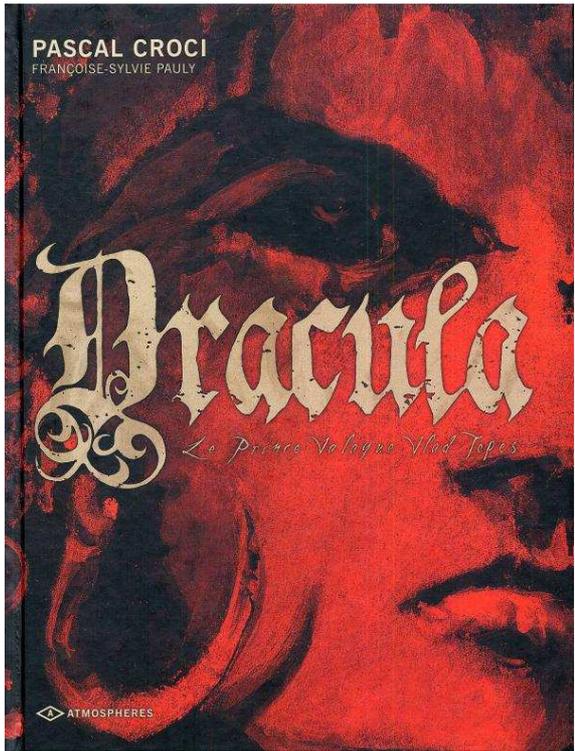


Opening panels of 'De zoon van de draak', actually the final part of a diptych, opening with 'Hydra' (De Rode Ridder #129; 1989)

- in yet another *De Rode Ridder* adventure, 'Vrykolakas' (#114; Vandersteen 1985), Karel Biddeloo turned to the vampire figure from the Balkan folklore, and thus not from the noble ('blue-blooded'), gothic atmosphere sphere - essentially created in the West – as in Stoker's *Dracula*



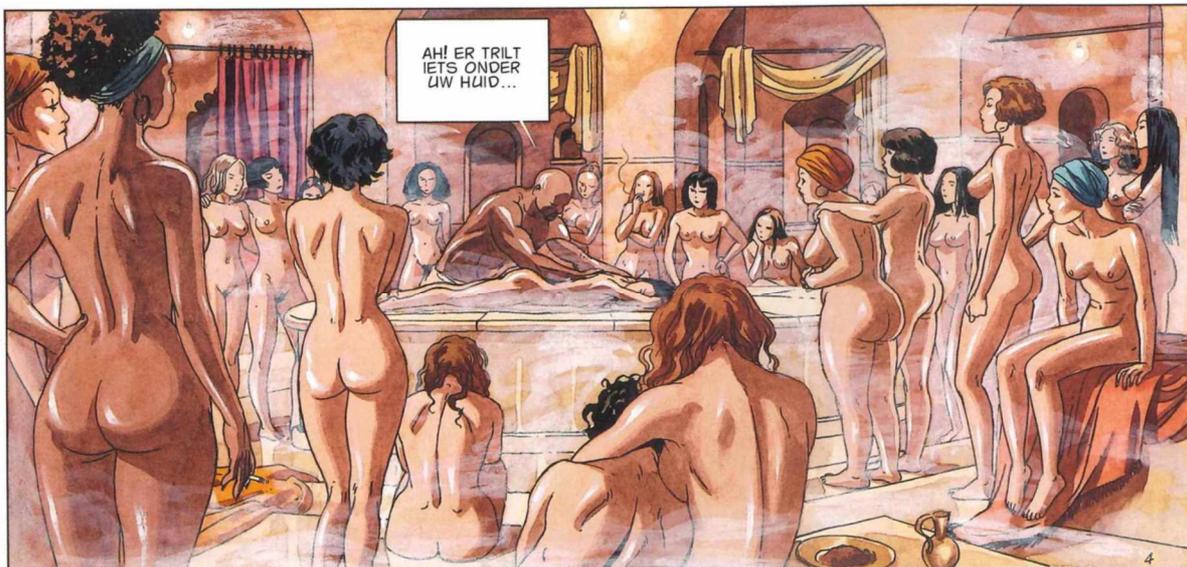
- although he never refers to the Balkans, the ‘Greek’ title (= the name of the green monster on the cover) alone refers to this superstition [cf. 2.1.1: nsBp 13]
- later on Vlad Țepeș (and the uncanny Balkans) would play important roles in many vampire-themed comic books, a subgenre that was given a boost by the success of and film adaptations of American Stephenie Meyer vampire romance series *Twilight* (2005-) (and the preceding *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* film en series)
 - a Franco-Belgian case in point is Croci & Pauly 2008



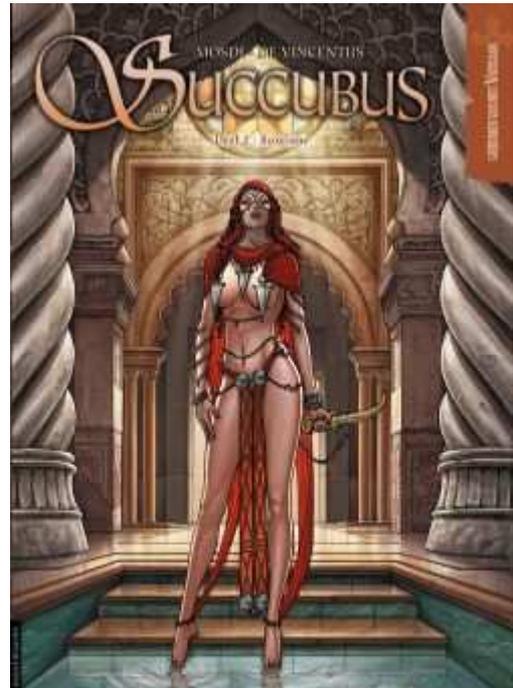
7.3 The exotic (Euro-Orientalist) Balkans

Although paradigms 7.1 and 7.2 also (re)present a usually fairly exotic (at least in the sense of being clearly (non-Western) depiction of the Balkans, within this paradigm I unite all (usually mainstream) comics 'applications' of the Balkans in which

- no Ruritania-like fictitious country and its typical intrigues are involved (7.1)
- no supernatural phenomena are at stake (7.2)
- this implies that the adventures narrated and depicted, though fictional, *can* take place in the real world
 - and here, the comics author has chosen to let them take place in the Balkans, because s/he likes to place her/his (Western) characters in a world sufficiently different from her/his own, but still relatively nearby [cf. in-between image]
 - A great deal of attraction is drawn here by the capital of the Ottoman Empire, the in several regards 'exotic' metropolis Istanbul
 - comics artists eagerly depict the former Constantinople in (Euro-)Orientalizing ways
 - because of the historical (and fantasized tales about the) harem in the Topkapı Palace, depicting historical Istanbul often gives rise to erotic images (cf. 'Erotic comics' in 3.1)
 - cf. this *Djinn* panel from & Dufaux & Mirallès (2004: 6):



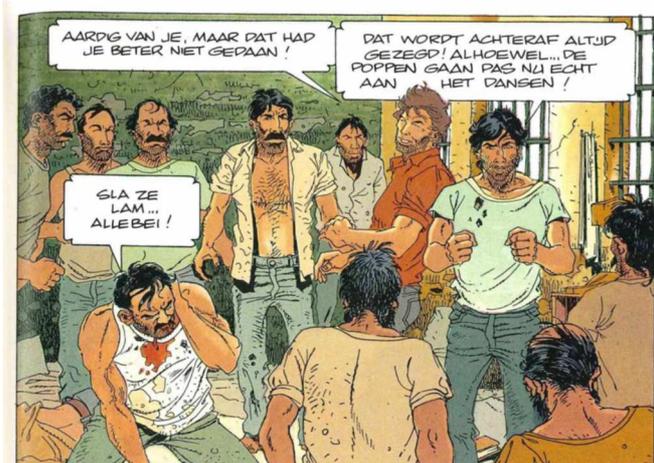
- Comparable eroticizing (Euro-)Orientalism is obvious in ‘Roxelane’ (Mosdi & De Vincentiis 2011) from the Franco-Belgian erotic-historical series *Succubus*:



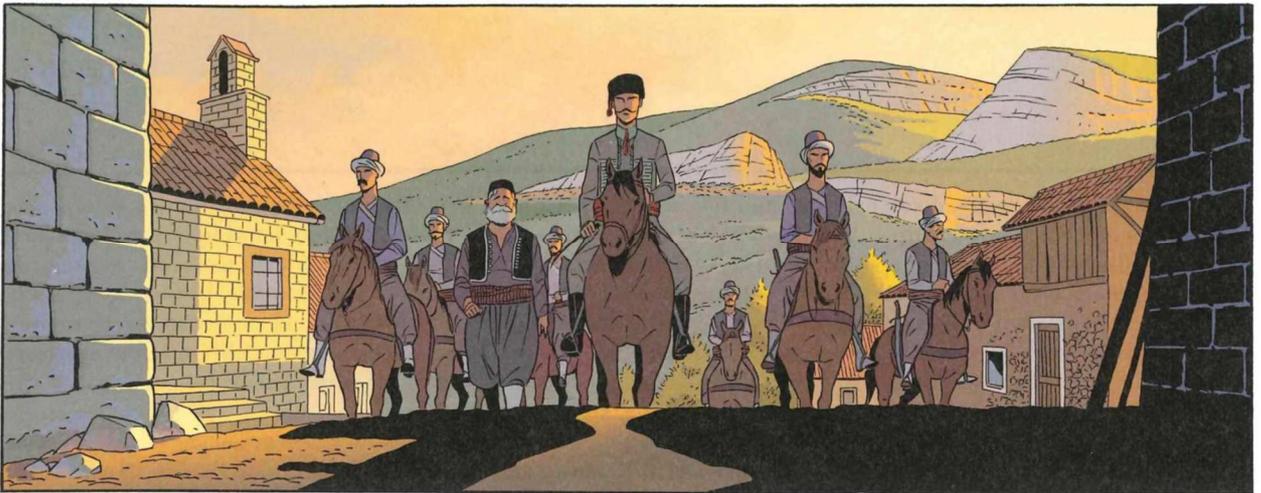
- on the cover we see Hürrem Sultan (ca. 1502-1558), in the West known as ‘Roxelana’ (the Ruthenian), the legal wife of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent
 - in the already-mentioned biographical album devoted to the latter, she appears ‘less sexy’ (Bruneau, et al. 2018: 13):



- Less [further on however fairly] erotic, though certainly Orientalizing is the way Istanbul features in the first album of the successful *Largo Winch* series, 'L'héritier' ('The heir'; Philippe Francq & Jean Van Hamme 1990), an adaptation by Van Hamme's novels about the same Yugoslav-born protagonist.
 - e.g., the typical 'scenery' of Ottoman-type mosques with their fine minarets and the famous bazaar (1990: 6), but also the cruel, grim prison scenes (e.g., 1990: 18)



- interestingly, since 2021, a spin-off, *La fortune des Winczlav*, of the successful Belgian *Largo Winch* series looks for the Balkan roots of the ancestry of Winch (originally the surname was 'Winczlav')
 - this still running three-volume miniseries starts in Montenegro, from the first pages onwards depicting Turkish officers trying to suppress the attempts of Christian Slaves to riot against the so-called Ottoman yoke (Van Hamme & Berthet 2021):

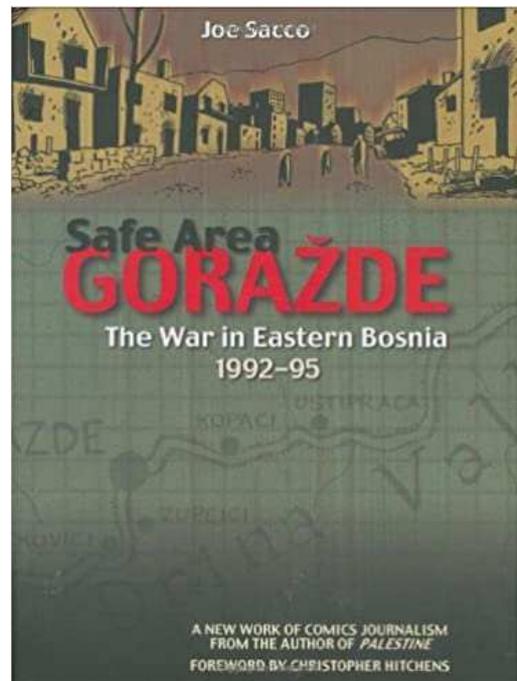


- cf., a.o., Balkan images A and F (1.2.3)
 - on the back cover, the author(s)/publisher has referred twice to the Balkans, thus indicating their continuing attraction to the present-day Belgian readers
- in all such representation of the Balkan 'Other', readers might think of themselves as (morally) superior
 - ~ Euro-Orientalism à la Said's Orientalism
 - often 'Orientalizing' focus on cruelty etc. of Ottoman Sultans and life in and near the harem, in the Istanbul-based prison in *Largo Winch* etc.

7.4 The documentary Balkans

Here I group all comics whose authors appear to have had the (sincere) intention to teach their readers something about the (history of the) Balkans.

- historical comics
 - e.g., Bruneau, et al. 2018 (supra)
- (documented) alternate history
 - e.g., Duval, Pécau & Yana 2017 (supra)
- graphic journalist works, diaries
 - à la Joe Sacco's renowned Bosnia-related works (cf. supra)
 - but there is no Belgian Sacco yet



7.5 The mirroring Balkans

Thematizing the Balkans in comics as a mirror for the (people from the) West

- see 6.1-2
 - how Hermann ‘mirrors’ what happens in the Western Balkans in the 1990s
- of course, the simultaneity of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s and the international booming of the graphic novel format is coincidental, but it has nonetheless offered new (wry) opportunities for comics authors and graphic novelists willing to question the ‘traditional’ Balkan images

Related to the operationalization of this paradigm, and by way of a conclusion, let us look at the (or at least some of the) challenges for future imagologists (and comics – and other – authors):

- imagology remains a Eurocentric discipline
- in imagology there is still
 - too much focus on
 - nations, the ‘national’
 - in spite of obvious trends of globalization, ‘postnationalism’
 - print fiction
 - although imagologists nowadays also often take films and tv series into account
 - taking into account comics – as we did here – may be considered a good ‘thing’ / practice, since (popular) comics usually reach a wider audience than literary works
 - too little focus on
 - the *ironic* use of ethnotypes
 - cf. the motto (supra) “embrace the clichés”
 - an in-depth study of Kolk 2017 (cf. supra) would be particularly enriching here
 - intersectionality (imagologists should also look at gender, social class ... stereotypes)
 - Regardless of which of the (first four) paradigms (7.1-7.4) the Western comics authors choose, the Balkans almost always seem to be a setting/place where the gap between woman and man and/or that between rich and poor is greater than in the West.

- Are these gaps the greatest common divisor in these Balkan-based comics?
- in any case: identity (politics) remains a very big issue
 - cf. ongoing the Ukraine-Russia conflict
 - imagology's task / core business still stands: deconstructing the discourse(s) of (national) ethnic essentialism

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