

Eckert.Dossiers No. 4

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Work in Progress

Hinz, Felix. 'The Crusades Myth in Historical Novels written in German: Work in Progress.' In *European Receptions of the Crusades in the Nineteenth Century. Franco-German Perspectives International Workshop – Research Group 'Myths of the Crusades'*. Eckert.Dossiers 4 (2011). <http://www.edumeres.net/urn:urn:nbn:de:urn:nbn:de:0220-2011-0022-0055>

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The Crusades Myth in Historical Novels written in German: Work in Progress

Abstract

The paper deals with an actual project that investigates the Crusades Myth in historical novels written in German or translated into German. Its source base consists of 116 historic novels from 1786 until 2011 that deal with the crusades to the Holy Land. The results should allow insights into the ideas and values that were particularly important to the German-speaking societies of the Early Modern Period. Furthermore it is to be expected that the key threads of ideas and values will allow for a productive comparison of politics, historical research and historical culture. Ultimately, the work on this topic aims to unveil the kind of methodology that can be used for a comparison of mentalities and cultures using partially fictive historical sources.

Historical Novels and History Didactics

Until now, the historical novel has been somewhat neglected by historical scholarship, and without good reason left to the field of literary history. Rather than dismissing it as an object of trivia, however, history research and especially history didactics, a field that considers itself 'the science of historical consciousness in society', as Karl-Ernst Jeismann has phrased it¹, would be well advised to take the historical novel more seriously. After all, together with period film, it is the most important manifestation of historical culture today.

The categorical dismissal of partially fictive genres is also the result of a self-deceptive assumption within historical scholarship. History, regardless of the form in which it appears, is simply inconceivable without imagination. In a constructivist sense, history is with good reason no longer counted today amongst the empirical sciences with regard to past realities, but rather considered in regard to the texts about these pasts. It would therefore appear entirely worthwhile to take a critical look at the relationship between fact and fiction in popular depictions of history too.

Generally speaking, the historical novel deals with an epoch prior to that of its own emergence. It has been given a more precise and appropriate disciplinary location by the Germanist Hugo Aust in his authoritative work, *Der historische Roman* (the historical novel): the latter 'emerges in the "border triangle" of autonomous poetry, precise historical research, and didactics seeking to legitimise knowledge. Its task is the representation of history, which it fulfils in three ways: It gives life to that which is past, it interprets that which has happened, and is itself a part of history.'²

¹ „Geschichtsdidaktik“, in: Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik, Ulrich Mayer, Hans-Jürgen Pandel et al., eds. (Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2006), 72.

² Hugo Aust, *Der historische Roman* (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1994), VII.

This broad genre is, however, somewhat heterogenous. For the purposes of this article we may differentiate between the reconstructive and the parabolic tendencies; most historical novels feature both. While the reconstructive tendency aims at the most authentic rendition of a historical epoch or person possible, the parabolic novel takes the historical setting as a reflection of its own present.³ Both varieties give the appearance of presenting historical 'truth' in a historicist sense and thus often endeavour, as far as possible, to paint a scientifically correct picture, using footnotes, historical maps, glossaries and/or bibliographies. Yet when analysing historical novels we must always bear in mind that these works are, as Alfred Döblin famously remarked, indeed novels and not 'history'.⁴ All formally scientific elements may be products of literary and artistic license.

While a historical novel can therefore not be methodically employed as a source for the era in which it is set, it may well, however, be used from the perspective of ideological critique as a source relating to the era in which it was written. As the historical novel is in itself a personification of history and tends to be built around interpersonal relationships, it also has an emotionalising effect, lending expression to the basic sentiments of the society of that specific era.⁵

The parabolic type and young-adult fiction appear most productive for the project to be depicted here, as the former tends towards self-reflection in its statements about its historical period, and young-adult fiction follows by definition a specifically pedagogical approach, thus producing a 'moral of the story' that is equally related to the present.

These are the strengths of the historical novel: while fictitious or intentionally non-factual settings should, strictly speaking, be ignored by historical scholarship in line with the fundamental principles *quod non est in actis non est in mundo* and the rule of writing *sine ira et studio*, they can nevertheless be of great inspiration for a critical reflection of one's own contemporary world.

The Middle Ages and the Crusades in Novels

Ever since the emergence of the historical novel, the Middle Ages have been a strikingly popular epoch in contemporary historical culture; that is, in the public medial sphere beyond schooling and academia. One reason for this nowadays⁶ might be that the medieval world – the uniformity of which is rather more an ideal of that time than a historical reality – may be different to the world of today, yet generally not considered different enough to count as inaccessible or incomprehensible. It offers a colourful, straightforward and sometimes bloodcurdling contrast to our anonymous, hectic and technological present day. For modern readers, the Middle Ages also appear to be an era that can provide mental compensation for the contemporary lack of primary

³ Ibid., 33.

⁴ Alfred Döblin, *Aufsätze zur Literatur* (Olten: Walter-Verlag, 1963), 169.

⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt recognised that "the greatest asset of an artwork is its capacity to unveil the inner truth of its figures that is obscured in their true appearance". Quoted in Barbara Potthast, *Die Ganzheit der Geschichte. Historische Romane im 19. Jahrhundert* (Goettingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007), 20.

⁶ For earlier times, cf. Georg Lukács, *Der historische Roman* (East Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1955), 65.

experience. We must bear in mind, of course, that the picture painted of the Middle Ages in the novels primarily conveys 19th century ideas that were more-or-less invented to serve the purpose of a romanticised alternative world,⁷ and that these images are thus far more fictional than most readers – and indeed most novelists – realise.

The 'Orient', on the other hand, remains an object of great fascination to western readers, from the apparently contemplative desert to erotic harem fantasies.⁸ The journeys of crusading protagonists in exotic foreign lands provides an ideal narrative thread for character development, such that most narrative could lead the reader to assume that the crusade constitutes something of a 'trip towards self-discovery' for the main character of the novel – and thus for the empathic reader.

Source Base and Status of the Project

The project's source base consists of 116 historic novels written in German that deal with the crusades to the Holy Land. (This means that – other than via random samples – the project does not examine novels that have not been translated into German, the history of the Teutonic Knights in the Baltic, the so-called 'heretic crusades' within western Europe, the reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula that took place at the same time and was also reminiscent of a crusade, or the Trials of the Templars, which have been paid a great deal of attention by European historical culture.)

The oldest novel that fits these criteria dates back to 1786.⁹ A study of the number of novels published reveals that they remained fairly constant, with only one novel every two or three years, until 1944. There is a striking gap from 1944 until 1977 in which only one crusades novel is published in German. This gap is a matter of interpretation. In the meantime, especially since the 1990s and following the 11 September 2001, however, there has been a notable surge of interest in such novels. Currently several crusades novels are published every month (see www.histocouch.de).

Until now, 60 of the 116 novels have been analysed. The current status of the analysis suggests that the project will be completed in 1½ - 2 years' time at the latest.

Expected Results of the Project

The expected results include insights into the ideas and values that were particularly important to the German-speaking societies of the Early Modern Period. To a large extent, the novels project these onto the Holy Land, Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre, and we can derive the inherent images of

⁷ Valentin Groebner, *Das Mittelalter hört nicht auf. Über historisches Erzählen* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 2008); Barbara Potthast, *Die Ganzheit der Geschichte. Historische Romane im 19. Jahrhundert* (Goettingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007).

⁸ Since imperial times a pertinent element of superiority has been inherent to this fascination. (Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978)).

⁹ Benedicte Naubert: *Walter von Montbarry, Großmeister des Tempelordens*, 2 vols (Leipzig: Weygand Verlag, 1786).

the 'other', but also first and foremost of the self. It becomes clear even at this early stage that Islam was hardly addressed at all in novels up until the mid-20th century, neither from a cultural nor from a religious perspective. Today this has only changed for the better in relation to the cultural aspect; however, there is recognition of the fact that medieval societies (which indeed are seen as considerably less tolerant than our own) were able to reach a *modus vivendi* of the various religions, even during the crusades. The novels provide numerous examples of this.¹⁰

It is to be expected that the key threads of ideas and values will allow for a productive comparison of politics, historical research and historical culture. In this regard, the literature originally written in German is compared with works translated from other languages. Here it is striking that almost only novels written in English have been translated. Why no French novels have been included remains an open question that needs to be resolved and subjected to interpretation.

Ultimately, the work on this topic aims to unveil the kind of methodology that can be used for a comparison of mentalities and cultures using partially fictive historical sources. It also aims to determine how teaching materials might be produced inspiring pupils to train their historical consciousness in a variety of ways, not least their political and moral consciousness. These materials would comprise three analytical levels: 1. sources in the form of extracts from novels; 2. sources from the time in which the novel was written; and 3. sources from the epoch in which the novel is set. I have discussed this method in an article using the examples of the 'Old Man of the Mountain' and the recently killed Bin Laden, who are more-or-less openly juxtapositioned¹¹ in contemporary novels.¹² Another example of such a process can be found in a novel of 1935 in which the Knights Templar are parabolically depicted as members of the resistance against the National Socialists.¹³ They defend the Holy Land (which stands for the Holy Roman Empire or, later, for Stauffenberg's 'Holy Germany') against the destructive barbarism to which they ultimately also fall victim, despite their valiant efforts. There are numerous further examples.

The Crusades Myth in Novels

Many findings of the workshop held at the Georg Eckert Institute workshop on 'European Receptions of the Crusades in the Nineteenth Century. Franco-German Perspectives' (16-17 February 2011) also apply to the depictions of history in novels: the highly positive portrait painted of Saladin, for instance, as emphasised by Jonathan Phillips in his keynote lecture. The Ayyubid Sultan has been an idol of crusade narratives ever since the Enlightenment, in both the Christian and the Muslim worlds. Jan Guillou encapsulates it thus: "His

¹⁰ The novels highlight the multicultural character of Mediterranean harbour cities such as Acre, Alexandria and Palermo, as well as that of Jerusalem with its many diverse districts that still exist today.

¹¹ Felix Hinz, 'Saladin und der Alte vom Berge. Geschichtsdidaktische Zugriffe auf Islambilder in parabolischen westlichen Kreuzzugsromanen', in: *Historische Sozialkunde. Geschichte – Fachdidaktik – Politische Bildung* 4 (2010), 49-56.

¹² See the pentalogy *Die Templerin* by Wolfgang Hohlbein 1999-2011.

¹³ Ernst Sommer, *Die Templer* (Nuremberg: Nest-Verlag, 1950 [1935]).

name became immortal, and for all time Saladin remained the only Saracen who was truly respected by the lands of the Franks"¹⁴ In the novels, his character embodies the chivalrous virtues that most crusaders (unlike their heathen counterparts) do not fulfil. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to read how the Italian adventurer Baudolino 'came thundering in [to the ravaged Hagia Sofia], as magnificent as Saladin, on a steed with a shabraque, a red cross on his chest, and a drawn sword in his hand' to intervene during the excessive plundering of Constantinople by the crusaders during the Fourth Crusade.¹⁵

The novels also focus a certain amount of interest on the so-called Children's Crusades. This may be because the groups of unarmed pilgrims whose journey ended in North African slave markets in 1212 and 1213 epitomise most aptly the concept of 'crusade' in its purely Christian terms of self-sacrifice or a *via dolorosa*. This element requires further inquiry, however, especially regarding its sociopolitical background and implications.

Subsequent to the western intervention procedures in Iraq, Afghanistan and, more recently, Libya, there has been growing unease in the West regarding military war in the service of a higher ideal ('freedom'?, 'democracy'?) and in view of the accusation of resuming, or continuing, the 'crusades'.¹⁶ This tendency is clearly visible in the novels, for example in the fictitious diary of the knight Roger of Lunel in the novel 'Der Kreuzritter. Das Tagebuch des Roger von Lunel' by Stephen Rivelle (2005; English 1996):

Wie vielschichtig die ganze Angelegenheit mittlerweile ist. Ich hatte geglaubt, klar zu sehen, wofür und wogegen ich kämpfe. Doch mit jeder Wegbiegung trübt sich mein Blick mehr.¹⁷

(How complex the whole affair has become. I had believed that I could see clearly for what and against what I am fighting. And yet with every turn of the path my vision becomes more clouded.)

The reward has become as uncertain as the journey. Roger of Lunel reminisces:

Außer der Dunkelheit, der feuchten Erde und dem dumpfen Kalkgeruch gab es nichts. Sollte das hier das Heilige Grab sein, um dessentwillen ich all das auf mich genommen hatte? Fast hätte ich gelacht. Hier war nichts,

¹⁴ Jan Guillou, *Die Büberin von Gudhem. Ein Roman aus der Zeit der Kreuzfahrer* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 2000), 464. (Engl. *The Road to Jerusalem* (London: Orion, 2002))

¹⁵ Umberto Eco, *Baudolino* (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 2003), 27. (Engl. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, Brace and Company, U.S.A. 2002). Only one novel has been identified so far in which Saladin is given a negative portrayal (that of an effeminate barbarian): Cecelia Holland, *Jerusalem*. (Engl. New York: Forge Books, 1997, Ger. Bergisch Gladbach: BLT, 2002.)

¹⁶ Cf. for instance Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds. Islam and the West* (Cambridge Mass./London: Belknap Press, 2004); Claus Kleber, *Amerikas Kreuzzüge. Wohin treibt die Weltmacht?* (Munich: Pantheon Verlag, 2005). Earlier works include Friedrich Heer, *Kreuzzüge – gestern, heute, morgen?* (Frankfurt a.M.: C.J. Bucher Verlag, 1969).

¹⁷ Stephen J. Rivelle: *Der Kreuzritter. Das Tagebuch des Roger von Lunel* (Munich: Heyne, 2005), 126. (Engl. *A Booke of Days. A Journal of the Crusade* (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1996). The English translations given here are not the original text, but re-translations from the German version.

und ich befand mich in der Mitte dieses Nichts. Hier also war meine Wahrheit - eine schmale Grabkammer. Mit einem Lächeln legte ich mich auf die Seite, rollte mich über mein Schwert gekauert zusammen und schlief ein.¹⁸

(There was nothing but darkness, damp earth and the musty smell of limestone. Was this supposed to be the Holy Sepulchre, for which I had taken all of this upon me? I almost laughed. Here there was nothing, and now I found myself in the midst of this nothing. And so here was my truth: a narrow burial chamber. With a smile I lay down on my side, huddled up over my sword, and fell asleep.)

Following the World Wars, the radiant heroes of the crusades whom we encounter in novels until well into the 19th century are now broken and shattered heroes. For by the end of the book, Lunel has lost everything: his faith, his ideals, his wife, his mistress, his child and his inheritance. Inspiring dreams have become crippling nightmares.¹⁹ And yet who will settle for such a provocative nihilistic view (as the many contemporary publications of crusade novels reveal)? As Ulrike Schweikert's novel *Das Siegel des Templers* asks: 'Are we not all pilgrims? Do we not all spend our lives in search of something?'²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 508.

¹⁹ Herbert Plate, *Der weiße Falke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer-Taschenbuchverlag, 1998), 329: 'Welch unwissende Toren sind wir doch gewesen, als wir aufbrachen, die Heilige Stadt zu befreien. Jerusalem wird mir zum Alptraum.' At this, the hero converts to Islam.

²⁰ Ulrike Schweikert, *Das Siegel des Templers* (Munich : Blanvalet Verlag, 2006), 40.