Abstract: „War Against the Turks and Media Change in the 15th Century“

Approach – Methods – Results

The topic of my doctoral thesis lies at the turn from the middle ages to early modern times. It ties two phenomenons together that each has already resulted in a copious research work; and yet up to now a close examination of their correlation was attempted only in rudimentary form. Since Wilfried Schulze's studies on the impact of the Turkish threat on the Holy Roman Empire in the late 16th century researchers take it for granted that letterpress printing played a pivotal role to the formation of an early modern public sphere. Schulze attributed a distinctly propagandistic and discursive function to the war against the Ottoman Turks, that helped to stabilise the political institutions of the Holy Roman Empire and served as analytical category for the emergence of a political public sphere in this time. Moreover, with Carl Göllner's repertory, beginning in 1501, there is a fundamental work of reference for anti-Turkish print products (the so-called Türkendrucke) available. His thoughts on public opinion and the Turkish threat anticipate Schulze. In general, the Turkish problem and its “media preparation” seem to be adequately researched for the time from 1501 onwards. Less can be said about the approximately 50 years prior to this date. For despite the remarkable coincidence between the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the invention of the printing press at roughly the same time, the correlation between the war against the Turks and the media change in the 15th century was of hardly any interest to researchers so far.

Thus, my doctoral thesis addresses the question, whether the preoccupation with the Ottoman enemy can be associated more closely with the usage of the new printing technology in Europe in the 15th century. If so, what practical forms and consequences did this relationship have?

As the reason for the lack of scholarly interest was not least due to the lack of a systematic collection of source material, my method of research was a heuristic compilation of all extant editions and copies of anti-Turkish texts that have been printed in Europa by the year 1500. Therewith I accomplished basic groundwork and bridged the gap to Göllner's repertory. I collected 841 editions and nearly 8000 copies of anti-Turkish prints that I
converted into a “Catalogue of European Türkendrucke of the 15th century”. It makes the quintessence of my bibliographical studies evident: The large amount of extant editions and copies testifies to the importance the war against the Turks had in the political and social debate of the 15th century and shows what medium the protagonists soon preferred to discuss the Turkish problem.

The second volume of my thesis comprises an exemplary study of the Türkendrucke, focusing on the history of their dissemination, transmission and reception. I followed the war against the Turks as a “media event” over the first 50 years after the invention of the printing press. A statistical evaluation of the catalogue resulted in an instructive observation: Counting the incunabula editions that appeared each year made it clear, that apart from a continuous production of texts on the Turks there are peak demands that correspond to the political situation. This means, that important events of the Ottoman expansion were directly reflected in the print medium. Contemporaries heavily relied on the new technology to process the war against the Turks. Comparing the production times of all extant incunabula editions it seems that the conquest of Euboia, a Venetian colony in the Eastern Mediterranean, in 1470 caused for the first time a reflection of the precarious political situation that appeared in print. Since then texts about the Turks were published regularly – sometimes more and sometimes less editions each year, but they were never suspended.

A survey of the places of printing confirms the hypothesis that print shops in the Holy Roman Empire and in Italy, being the regions where the crusade against the Turks was most fiercely preached, produced a fortified amount of the Türkendrucke. The statistical distribution of languages in which the texts were written, corresponds to another observation regarding the main syndicate that stood behind the production of the Türkendrucke: Almost 75% of the Türkendrucke derive from church administration (indulgences, papal bulls and briefs, tax mandates etc.) and were consequently drawn up in Latin. Only to a forth did other text genres such as anti-Turkish speeches, treatises, news coverage, poems or drama add up. The majority of these was likewise written in Latin. Gradually German and Italian texts were also being published but their numbers could never compete with the Latin documents by 1500. The Turkish issue was one
primarily treated in Latin, the language of church and science.

I further interpreted the statistical results in four exemplary studies. They focus on the thematic complexes of the late medieval practice of granting indulgences, of oratory, politics and the printing press, of war and the media and of knowledge and the media. Alongside, I considered problems of art history and media sciences like print illustration and the location of the new printing medium in technical and economic production processes around 1500.

The exemplary studies aim to put writings on the Turks and letterpress printing in a mutual relationship. They are about contextualising the first products of the printing press in the historical and social history of the late middle ages, about their interrelation with war preparations and war propaganda and about the media change embracing an European perspective. As with Heraclitus the “war is the father of all things”, I performed a critical inspection of the war against the Turks as driving force behind processes of technological innovation and cultural communication.

I showed that contemporary statements about the Turks were obviously limited to the prevalent Anti-Turkish discourse, that is, the firm claim to a European wide threat posed by the Ottoman Turks since 1453. Thus, the printed texts centred on war propaganda. Indulgences, exhortations, anti-Islamic treatises, graphic narrations of war crimes, letters and orations against the Turks were the early print shops' main products in Europe up until 1500. Positive approaches by “turkophile” authors such as Giovanni Mario Filelfo's heroic epic about sultan Mehmed II. or more “enlightened” strategies like the ambitious project of the Spanish cardinal Juan de Segovia who initiated a translation of the Koran, and Nicolai de Cusa's attempt of peaceful conversion in his “De pace fidei” never made it into print then. Likewise, producers, texts and users make it clear that the discourse about the Ottoman Turks was defined by much older religious dynamics that trace back to the high medieval crusading movement, to the image of Islam provided by academic scholasticism and to the age-old war against heterodoxy.
Although (or maybe because?) toughly negotiated but never translated into action the great European war against the Turks in the 15th century not only kept solid as political topic, but also remained popular in print. While the buying interest in other political topics easily flagged when friction subsided, the Turkish problem bestowed a nearly permanent demand upon the print shops. Two factors seem to be liable: First, the advancing Ottoman expansion challenged Europe at regular intervals and lead to the feverish production of Anti-Turkish texts. Second, since the great crisis of 1480, the year in which sultan Mehmed II. succeeded in securing a Turkish bridgehead on the Southern Italian coast, more and more texts about the Turks were edited and printed that have not been stimulated by an on-going military event. In other words, the Turks became the object of a more clinical concern. Instead of incessant lamentations, dreadful news coverage and administrative documents writers and readers of that time fancied a deeper insight into Turkish life. Even so, these treatises about the Ottoman empire, its history, government, religious cults and ways of living were still a product of Europe’s constant preoccupation with the Turkish threat, so it is only wise to treat the knowledge they imparted with some caution. The history of publication of some such treatises has just shown how they in particular succumbed to the current religious and political discourses.

My work has shown that the war against the Turks and the invention of the printing press cannot be separated any longer from their lines of development after 1453 that lead the way to the constitution of a new religious-political public sphere. It was not Luther’s reformation or the Peasants’ War of the 16th century that extended and perpetuated the familiar forms of a medieval public sphere, but the war against the Turks that originated in the events of 1453. Following Rainer Wohlfeil who postulated a public sphere of the Reformation era (“reformatorische Öffentlichkeit”) I suggest that a similar process took place 50 years earlier, when a new decidedly Anti-Turkish public sphere began to emerge in a complex balance of political conditions, religious structures and cultural innovations at the end of the middle ages.