

## Nasreddin Hodja's foolish wisdom: Slavic literary adaptations of a Turkish folk hero

CHARLES SABATOS

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Cultural icons, whether historical, metaphorical, or fictional, form an essential part of modern national identity. One common feature of such figures is that they blur the distinction not only between “high” and “low” culture but between real and imaginary (even historical personalities take on fictionalized elements, such as the popular American legend of George Washington cutting down a cherry tree and refusing to lie about it). In Central and Eastern Europe, where relatively recent political borders cut through shared traditions, icons cross cultural boundaries as well. For example, Prague is often symbolized by two figures, one German and one Czech: the writer Franz Kafka (whose modernist alienation has made him an almost mythical figure) and the “good soldier Švejk” (whose fictional adventures in Jaroslav Hašek’s novel are so well known that they have taken on a life of their own). In other cases, the same person or character is claimed by more than one cultural tradition, as in the case of the real-life but heavily mythologized bandit Juraj Janošík, who is claimed by both Slovakia and Poland. However, a uniquely transcultural role is played by the Turkish folk hero Nasreddin Hodja, a supposedly historical character who is the subject of countless comic anecdotes. While his “foolish wisdom” has become a traditional part of many societies across the Muslim and former Ottoman world, he has been adapted as a character in full-length works of fiction and drama not only in South Slavic cultures like Bosnian and Bulgarian, which were under direct Turkish influence, but also in East Slavic (Russian) and West Slavic (Czech) literatures. What is interesting in these works is the way that this character which is so strongly identified with Turkish culture has been domesticated as an icon of resistance for audiences and readers in Slavic countries (many of which have traditionally seen Turkey as a hostile power).

While Nasreddin Hodja (*hodja*, written *hoca* in Turkish, is an honorific meaning “teacher,” sometimes with religious connotations) was supposedly a real person who lived in the Anatolian town of Akşehir in the 13th century, the present-day figure is largely derived from folk tradition. He is usually portrayed as a turbaned old man riding a donkey, sometimes seated backwards. A typical anecdote featuring Nasreddin’s combination of foolishness, greed, and wit appears in Nebi Özdemir’s recent collection in English, published by the Turkish Ministry of Culture:

One day someone came to the Hodja’s house and asked for the loan of his donkey. “The donkey’s not at home,” replied the Hodja. Just then the donkey on the roof started braying.

“Oh,” said the man, “you say the donkey’s not home but what is that braying then?”  
“What a strange man you are!” exclaimed the Hodja. “Are you going to believe the donkey’s words or mine?” (2011, 113)

As Necmi Erdoğan has pointed out, Nasreddin’s

alternation between the wise man and the fool, the wit and the numbskull, both within and among anecdotes, produces a sense of ambivalence. Mostly he occupies an ambivalent and liminal space betwixt and between folly and wisdom, naïveté and ingenuity, stupidity and sagacity (2013, 22).

Many of the early anecdotes about Nasreddin Hodja contain obscene, erotic, or irreverent material, such as the one that Erdoğan quotes from Pertev Naili Boratav’s collection: “The Hoca sees a minaret and asks people what they call it; when he is told, ‘That’s the town’s penis,’ ‘Do you have a behind to match it?’ he exclaims” (quoted in Erdoğan 2013, 24). Such anecdotes from the oral tradition were eliminated in later printed collections, as Nasreddin came to be seen as an icon of Islamic or Turkish culture. Hakkı Gürkaş emphasizes the significance of the censored material: “These stories bring back into discourse what the official culture has marginalized and repressed. These stories are anti-hegemonic. The grotesque imagery deployed in these stories mocks and ridicules the absolutist morality and degrades the official culture that relies on it” (2008, 178).

In some of the stories, Nasreddin displays a resistance to political power, particularly toward the conqueror Timur the Lame (known in the West as Tamerlane). For example, in one anecdote, “when Tamerlane asks Nasreddin whether he would go to Heaven or Hell, the Hoca says that no sooner than he closes his eyes he will join the club of great emperors like Nimrod, Pharaoh, Alexander, and Chengiz Khan, alluding to Hell” (Boratev, quoted in Erdoğan 2013, 27). However, as Necmi Erdoğan explains, the hodja uses strategies such as “manipulation, trickery, simulation, disguise, and repartee” rather than open defiance, representing “the predominantly evasive stance of the subaltern social classes and groups vis-à-vis the state in the Ottoman Empire” (2013, 22).

One of the best-known Tamerlane stories illustrates Hodja’s evasive strategy: Tamerlane sends an elephant to the Hodja’s village for pasture as a form of taxation. Within a short while it eats all the crops of the villagers. When the people ask the Hodja to see Tamerlane and to have the elephant sent back, he suggests that they go and see him all together. But when the Hodja is about to enter into Tamerlane’s tent, he looks behind him and realizes that all the people have deserted him one by one for their fear of Tamerlane. Angry with his fellow villagers, the Hodja enters the presence of Tamerlane and says to the emperor, “I have come to tell you that the elephant you gave us is lovely. We wish that you would give us a female elephant too” (Boratav, quoted in Erdoğan 2013, 27).

In any case, since the actual Timur (who lived from c. 1330 to 1405) was born after the supposedly real Nasreddin died (c. 1275–85), these stories represent a “safe” form of political critique, without any historical basis. According to Oğuz Cebeci, “we can say that Nasreddin Hodja goes beyond social control [...] through ironic parody” (2008, 106). Cebeci even suggests, following Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the

carnavalesque, that the tradition of folk laughter embodied in Nasreddin generated the Turkish novel (116). Yet despite his great potential, Nasreddin has rarely appeared as a character in Turkish fiction. One of the few exceptions is in the pseudonymous author Gülcemal's 2012 novel *al-Qalandar*. In the competition between Nasreddin Hodja and the poets Yunus Emre and Rumi (Mevlana), which parodies the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in *The Frogs* by Aristophanes, Nasreddin is naturally the winner (Budak 2014, 207).<sup>1</sup>

Some of the most important research on Nasreddin Hodja has been produced by scholars from Central and Eastern Europe. In his history of the Ottoman Empire, published in 1734, the Moldavian prince Dimitrie Cantemir included three of the anecdotes featuring Nasreddin and Timur. The Bohemian folklorist Albert Wesselski compiled an extensive collection of anecdotes, *Der Hodscha Nasreddin* (1911), in which he traced Cantemir's Nasreddin anecdotes to Arabic and Hebrew sources.<sup>2</sup> As Ulrich Marzolph states,

the anecdotes mentioned by Cantemir, rather than supplying reliable historical information, testify to the fact that Nasreddin in the seventeenth century had become the point of crystallization of a number of anecdotes originally not at all connected with him as a historical or even fictional character (1996, 492).

Marzolph further points out that the “most comprehensive documentation of Nasreddin Hodja anecdotes ever published” was edited in Russian by M.S. Kharitonov (496). Several of the leading Turkish experts on Nasreddin Hodja also had Balkan connections. Mehmet Fuad Köprülü, whose 1918 monograph was one of the earliest Turkish scholarly works on this topic, was descended from an influential Ottoman family of Albanian origin. Pertev Naili Boratav was born in what is now Bulgaria, and his collection (cited above) includes a chapter on the Nasreddin Hodja tradition in the Balkan countries (1996, 61–67). As the Bosnian scholar Fehim Bayraktarević has explained,

Nasreddin Hoca became known not only to the Rumanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians and Jugoslavs but also in Armenia, Georgia, the Caucasus, the Crimea, the Ukraine, Russia, Turkestan, etc. On these long travels, Nasreddin naturally underwent many changes, distortions and additions were made which are quite foreign to the Turkish text, so that the number of his [...] stories increased to several hundred (1934, 77).

Velitchko Valtchev notes that “Nasreddin Hodja was popularized [...] by literary works devoted to him by poets, novelists, playwrights, etc. from different countries,” offering examples from Serbian, Russian, and Bulgarian (as well as French) literature (1978, 211). In general, however, scholars have paid little attention to the phenomenon of Nasreddin Hodja as a transcultural icon in non-Turkish literatures. The primary aim of the present article is to provide a broad overview of this distinctive (and perhaps unexpected) aspect of Nasreddin adaptations in twentieth-century Slavic literatures, particularly focusing on the “changes, distortions and additions” mentioned above by Bayraktarević.

Considering Nasreddin Hodja's origin in the oral tradition of social humor, it is logical that dramatic works make up the majority of the adaptations of this charac-

ter into literary works (i.e., full-length written texts composed by a single author). One of the oldest to survive is a Turkish/Persian manuscript held in the archives in Poznań, Poland: a nineteenth-century play entitled *Nasreddin Hoca'nin Mansibi* (Nasreddin Hoca's appointment to an official post). Metin And, who transcribed the play into modern Turkish (1969), suggests that it was written by a Turkish diplomat (under the Slavic-sounding pseudonym Johann Lipa) for students at the School of Foreign Languages in Vienna:

Turkish was [apparently] taught by members of the Turkish Embassy staff. Though they no doubt wrote these plays, they chose as professional diplomats to remain anonymous. They probably dictated them as exercises to students, who in turn translated them into the three major languages of the Austrian Empire (German, French and Italian) (1984, 52).

The fact that Nasreddin Hodja was seen as a suitable topic of translation for Central European Orientalists shows his function as a transcultural icon between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. It was in the 20th century, however, that Nasreddin became a frequent character in Slavic literature. The widespread appeal of this character suggests what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the “masks of the clown and the fool” used by novelists: “They are linked with the folk through the fool’s time-honored privilege not to participate in life, and by the time-honored bluntness of the fool’s language [...] at last specific forms had been found to reflect private life and make it public” (1981, 161). Leonid Solovyov’s comic novel *Povest o Khodzhe Nasreddine* (1935, *The Tale of Hodja Nasreddin*, 2009) places Nasreddin in Bukhara, whose emir becomes a parodic replacement for modern forms of repression. The Bosnian Serb author Branko Ćopić’s cycle *Nasradin Hodža u Bosni* (1939, Nasreddin Hodja in Bosnia), part of the short story collection *Borci i bjegunci* (1939, Fighters and fugitives), transplants him to a Slavic context with deep Ottoman roots and Veselin Stoyanov’s opera *Hitar Petar* (1967, Clever Petar) is based on Nasreddin’s traditional counterpart in Bulgarian folklore. In Czech drama, both Jiří Mahen’s *Nasredin* (1928) and Josef Kainar’s *Nebožtík Nasredin* (1959, The late Nasreddin) feature Nasreddin in his native Turkish setting.

### THE SOVIET NASREDDIN

Among the Slavic literary adaptations of Nasreddin Hodja, Leonid Solovyov’s two-part novel *The Tale of Hodja Nasreddin* (1935), has enjoyed the greatest international popularity, with translations into numerous languages, including Persian and Hebrew, and two translations into English (in 1956 and 2009). In the first part, *Vozmutitel spokoistviya* (The Disturber of the Peace), Nasreddin returns from exile to Bukhara, whose population is suffering under corrupt leadership. Solovyov drew upon his own experience with Muslim cultures: He had been born in Ottoman-ruled Lebanon (where his father taught) and worked as a correspondent in Tashkent. Yet aside from his donkey and his wit, Solovyov’s Nasreddin is considerably different from the legendary figure, and the Central Asian setting (distant in both time and space from modern Russia) gives the author considerable freedom. In fact, this thirty-five-year-old adventurer bears closer resemblance to another trickster protagonist of early Soviet literature, Ilf and Petrov’s Ostap Bender. What gave the book its great

popularity was its metaphorical relevance for the political atmosphere of the 1930s. While this reimagining of Nasreddin won popular acclaim, Solovyov was punished for the work's bold political message. The second part, *Ocharovannyj prints* (The Enchanted Prince), was written while Solovyov was held in a prison camp under suspicion of terrorism against the Soviet state. Neither the book's success nor the author's punishment is surprising in a climate of Stalinist purges, but it is striking that a work openly criticizing an absolute ruler for devastating his nation could be published at all during such a period of repression.

At the beginning of the first novel, Solovyov's Nasreddin has penetrated the harem of an Iranian dignitary and seduced his wife, who does not even know his name: "Listen, then – you have spent the night with Hodja Nasreddin! I am Hodja Nasreddin, disturber of the peace and sower of discord, the same one whose name is trumpeted by the heralds in all the squares and bazaars along with promises of a large reward for his head" (4). He slips out past the sleeping guard, almost as if by magic: "And once again, the stony white road would ring and the dust would fly under the brisk hooves of his donkey" (4).

Despite his subversive ways, Nasreddin is a patriot, even when he arrives after dark and is locked outside the city gates: "He loved his homeland, and there was no greater love in the world for this crafty joker with a black beard on his copper-tanned face and sly sparks in his clear eyes" (7). He immediately realizes that the new emir, who has been ruling for eight years, has ruined the city and exploited its people. The greedy tax collector, who strips the wealthy merchants of their goods, even charges the almost penniless Nasreddin an entrance tax: first as a visitor, then for conducting business, followed by a donation for the mosque, and finally a "visitor tax" for his donkey to visit his relatives as well. "You are correct, o wise chief, indeed my ass has a great many relatives in Bukhara. If he did not, our emir would long have been booted from the throne with practices like these, while you, o honorable one, would have been impaled for greed!" (10)

Solovyov's novel was the basis of the Russian film *Nasreddin v Buhare* (Nasreddin in Bukhara, 1943), directed by the Soviet film pioneer Yakov Protazanov, followed by the Uzbek film *Nasriddinning sarguzashtlari* (The Adventures of Nasreddin Hodja, 1946) directed by Nabi Ganiyev. The book was later adapted into a highly successful musical in Tel Aviv, illustrating the power of this comic icon across borders of genre as well as culture. The humble Nasreddin reached the peaks of Soviet high culture when the poem *Yumor* (Humor) by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, which includes Nasreddin as a personification of humor, was set to music by Dmitri Shostakovich in his Symphony no. 13 (first performed in 1962). In Yevtushenko's poem, Nasreddin is celebrated along with Aesop as a proof of humor's subversive power: "From houses which bigots footprinted / with their puny legs like spokes, / all banalities Hodja Nasreddin / ejected like chessmen with jokes!" (1968, 101) Solovyov further inspired the Bosnian author Slavko Mičanović's 1971 novel *Nasradin-hodža u Stambolu* (Nasreddin Hodja in Istanbul), in which the representation of this Turkish hero was shaped by reciprocal literary influence between Slavic cultures (Popovic 2005, 286).

## NASREDDIN HODJA IN THE BALKANS

Of course, Nasreddin Hodja had existed in Balkan oral folklore throughout the centuries of Turkish rule, but his appearance in South Slavic literature was partly mediated by the work of Western Orientalists. In 1894, the Serbian satirist Stevan Sremac published the collection *Nasradin-hodža, njegove dosetke i budalaštine u pričama* (Nasreddin Hodja, His witticisms and foolishness in the tales), which was based on the German translation (by E. Mullendorf) of a Turkish collection (by Mehmed Tevfik) from 1883 (Popovic 2005, 283). Ksenia Aykut states that Sremats drew on the unique lexical similarities between Serbian and Turkish to bring the anecdotes closer to the original: “Sremats did not restrict himself to translating, but also used his imagination to create a different narrative style that enriches the anecdotes by making them more charming and cloaking them in an Eastern atmosphere” (2012, 446).<sup>3</sup> According to Alexandre Popovic (2005, 285), a number of creative and scholarly works related to Nasreddin Hodja were published after the establishment of Yugoslavia, including Fehim Bayraktarević’s monograph *Nasredin-hodžin problem* (1934, The problem of Nasreddin Hodja).<sup>4</sup>

The most fully developed adaptation of Nasreddin Hodja in interwar Yugoslav literature is Branko Ćopić’s series of twelve stories *Nasredin Hodža u Bosni* (Nasreddin Hodja in Bosnia), which is set in a timeless (possibly Ottoman) Bosnia and uses numerous words of Turkish origin. Popovic describes Ćopić’s Nasreddin as “very successfully adapted to the local reality and psychology” (2005, 285), but the character in these stories is melancholy rather than merry, resisting a world that cannot understand him. This pessimistic representation may reflect the author’s (justified) fears of ethnic conflict on the verge of the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> In the first story, *Na granicama* (On the borders), Nasreddin climbs a steep mountain trail and thinks of the fellow villager who has scolded him for seeing all men as equal:

Nasreddin Hodja, you’ve been our hodja for a long time and we all respect you, but brother, you’re somehow on his own and out of his world – all of Bosnia laughs at you. Well, they say that [...] you like to drink, which isn’t likely for any believer, much less a hodja, but, Nasreddin Hodja, poor man, you don’t look at who is what faith, but you act as if the whole world is your brother, whether Vlach, Šokac, or Civut [i.e. Orthodox, Catholic, or Jewish] [...] You anger Allah, Nasreddin Hodja, because you don’t want to see how great is the border he has put between us and other faiths (Ćopić 1964, 138).

Ćopić’s hodja lives in a world where happiness is illusory, although he struggles for something better. The title of the story *Srećna zemlja* (Happy land) is ironic, for Nasreddin doubts the very existence of such a place: “A happy land, a land where one can live contentedly and happily. Is there such a land?” (172) Even the beautiful sight of a seaside city below him brings out the contrast with “his mountainous, dark, and unhappy Bosnia” (173).

In the final story, *Razgovor s čovjekom* (A talk with a man), Nasreddin sits in the forest reflecting on his fight for justice in the world: “How much pain and sorrow there is in this world. And is there no one who will take the Hodja’s place?” He watches an ant, who “stands and fights against all the powerful and cold forces around himself.” While this seemingly gives him hope for the future, the narrator

notes that this is “the last and warmest conversation of the strange and funny warrior Nasreddin Hodja” (202). When he is found lying dead that evening, one old man mumbles: “He was always like that, his whole life long. Such a strange *insan* [creature]” (203). Rather than a man of the people, the Bosnian Nasreddin is an outsider, his “otherness” emphasized by Ćopić’s use of a Turkism (*insan*) to end his text.<sup>6</sup>

Both culturally and geographically, Bulgaria is the closest of the Slavic nations to Turkey, and anecdotes featuring Nasreddin Hodja (known there as Nastradin) were published as early as 1853. As Valtchev has noted, “it is possible to observe, in the development of Bulgarian folklore, some phenomena which one does not encounter in the folklore of other peoples” (1978, 220). The most striking of these is Nastradin’s Bulgarian counterpart Hitar Petar, who usually outwits the Hodja.<sup>7</sup> Yet even after the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottomans in 1878, collections of anecdotes about Nastradin/Nasreddin were published in numerous editions. Stajnova explains the difference between the Bulgarian and Turkish versions: “The Bulgarian storyteller tends to join several episodes in a single longer one [...] The Turkish anecdotes on Nasreddin Hodja, on the other hand, rest above all on dialogue and are characterized by an almost total lack of description” (1966, 205).

Veselin Stoyanov’s opera *Clever Petar*, featuring Nasreddin as a supporting character, premiered in Sofia in 1958.<sup>8</sup> As Stoyanov stated,

humor freshens, and makes a person livelier and hardier. This is why [...] I have devoted a great deal of attention to humor [...] Unfortunately, during the development of the plot, there were no other sources in our literature besides the folktales [...] Thus] we were faced with many challenges during our first attempt to adapt Hitar Petar for the opera (quoted in Fischer 2001).

Stoyanov’s Nastradin Hodja is essentially a supporting character who is allied with the greedy *chorbadji* (village leader) Ignat. In Act One, he confronts Hitar Petar at a village fair while looking for his debtors. In Act Two, Hitar Petar actually enters Nastradin’s house and speaks to his wives (although hidden in a well) while Nastradin is at the mosque. In Act Three, Nastradin and Ignat are caught in a compromising position by Hitar Petar, who takes the Hodja’s bag of coins as a wedding gift for his own daughter. In Communist Bulgaria, Nasreddin is no longer an icon of folk wisdom but a symbol of bourgeois hypocrisy.

### CZECH ADAPTATIONS OF A TURKISH ICON

The Czech lands (which were never under Ottoman rule but inherited a historical mistrust of the Turks through the shared cultural tradition of Habsburg Central Europe) seem like a much less likely setting for the Oriental wisdom of Nasreddin Hodja. Yet three tales about this comic icon were published in 1834 in the magazine *Česká Wčela*, and several stories from the version by Mehmet Tevfik Fikret (also the source for Sremac’s collection) were translated into Czech in 1894 (Becka 1984, 174). In addition to Wesselski’s collection in German (mentioned above), Jan Rypka, one of the most prominent Czech Orientalists, translated a series of Nasreddin anecdotes in 1909, followed by Richard Hrdlička’s translation *Žerty a příběhy Nasredinna Chodži* (1913, Jokes and adventures of Nasreddin Hodja). Anecdotes were also translated

into Slovak by the leading Ottoman scholars Josef Blaskovics and Vojtech Kopčan (Celnarová 2003, 207).

The first of two plays in twentieth-century Czech literature to be based on Nasreddin was the 1928 comedy *Nasreddin čili nedokonalá pomsta* (Nasreddin or the imperfect revenge) by Jiří Mahen, who had previously written about the Slovak hero Janošík (reflecting his sympathy for the Slovaks while they were still under Hungarian rule). Mahen's primary sources on Nasreddin were presumably Wesselski's (or possibly Hrdlička's) collections, but in the introduction, he explains that this "fairytale comedy from the Orient" was inspired by his travel "in the South" (specifically, Bosnia and Herzegovina). According to the stage directions, the setting is "Akşehir, Sarajevo and Mostar combined" (1962, 209–213), so while Mahen does not completely transplant Nasreddin to a domestic setting as some other authors do, his Orient has a Slavic, hence partly "domesticated", influence. His choice of a Turkish theme illuminates the cultural situation in interwar Czechoslovakia, when the newly independent state was forging a self-confident national identity engaged with the world.<sup>9</sup> As Štěpán Vlašín suggests, despite the play's "optimistic folk humor," it had the timely political aim of "uncover[ing] the demagoguery of fascism," presenting Nasreddin (not unlike Janošík) as a folk hero fighting against injustice, but in this case "not with arms, but with humor and cunning" (1962, 308).

The first of the three acts opens with an old water-seller sleeping by the side of the road. Two strangers arrive in Akşehir, and speaking with a native of the town, they say that they have come to see its famous judge, Nasreddin: "We heard that Nasreddin actually fell from a ladder, and that's why he's crazy, that's why he has whims." The townsman tells them that he was actually "knocked down, when he climbed up someone else's tree – to steal fruit!" (Mahen 1962, 221) Although it is forbidden to discuss the political situation with outsiders, it is later revealed that the Caliph, the true ruler of the city, has been missing for some time. In the following scenes, the visitors see Nasreddin resolve a dispute (based on a famous anecdote) between a kebab-seller and a beggar: The kebab-seller claims that the beggar has "stolen" the scent of his kebab, and in return the beggar is required by Nasreddin to "pay" with the sound of rattling coins.

Nasreddin does not appear at all in the second act, which features a "prince" and "princess" who symbolize the type of modern European bourgeois that Mahen (with his leftist sympathies) despised. The princess is angry with her husband, who is unfaithful to her with their servant girls and decides to betray him with the most disgusting man she can find: the garbage collector Abdula. In Act Three, when the princess and Abdula come before Nasreddin to be judged, he diverts the mob's demands for justice by making a surprising announcement: "A woman snatched a man in order to take revenge, but she had more next to her in bed than she herself knew!" (290) He claims that the garbage man is actually the missing Caliph, the princess faints from shame, and everyone follows Abdula away in admiration. However, the final scene reveals that the true Caliph is the old water-seller from the beginning of the play, whose identity has been protected by Nasreddin's clever lie. The Caliph concludes the play by praising him: "Oh, Nasreddin, what paradise there will be on earth, if every-

one will have such a talent for fantasy as you and – pardon – me too!” (293) Despite its inauthentic setting and meandering plot, Mahen’s adaptation offers a social message beneath its light humor.

In the late 1950s, Nasreddin Hodja returned to Czech drama with greater political significance in *The Late Nasreddin* by Josef Kainar. In Kainar’s play, the citizens of Akşehir beg Nasreddin Hodja to save them from the conqueror Timur, who has planned to plunder the city as a gift for his wife. Nasreddin rides his donkey to Timur’s camp, entertains him with his jokes, and even creates a miracle: The donkey is able to produce pearls. When he returns to Akşehir, having spared the city from the conqueror, he gives the pearls to its citizens, only to be attacked and beaten to death by those who think he is hiding still more pearls from them. In the final scene, Azrael, the angel of death, comes to take him away:

NASREDDIN: Leave me here, at least for a little while...

ANGEL: The order is, to heaven, and in one piece...

NASREDDIN: And I’ll run away. And I’ll come back. Heaven is not for me.

ANGEL: And what if hell isn’t – where will you go? Ha!

NASREDDIN: Here. I like it here. Isn’t it possible to divide me somehow among the people, so I can live on longer here? (1959, 115)

Milan Jariš, in his afterword to the play, proposes an anti-imperialist message: Kainar “destroys the legend of the conqueror Timur by confronting the conqueror with the free, thus wise, Nasreddin” (Jariš 1959, 118). Xenia Celnarová has suggested that Nasreddin’s “intelligence, courage, and lower-class outspokenness” is a self-portrait of Kainar, and notes that the successful revival of the play two decades later (in 1979) had only a short run before being removed from the stage: “Perhaps the statesmen and political leaders of the time recognized themselves in Timur and the foolish citizens of Akşehir!” (1996, 72–73) Like both Mahen’s and Solovyov’s versions of Nasreddin Hodja, Kainar’s play has only a distant connection to its source material, and the greed of the city’s citizens reflects a very personal outlook on society’s ingratitude toward its artists. Kainar’s use of this transcultural icon was a cautious first step towards questioning the socialist regime that he had fervently supported in his poetry earlier in the 1950s.

In 1990, Miloš Mendel published a collection of stories related to Nasreddin Hodja and his Central Asian and Middle Eastern variants in Czech translation. Mendel’s afterword specifically highlights the relevance of this Turkish figure by relating it to the Czech tradition of passive resistance embodied in Jaroslav Hašek’s “good soldier Švejk”:

Ordinary people tried to overcome the narrow and rigid framework for these values [...] by their own cunning, inventiveness, and the originality of their behavior and reasoning, or at least simulated “Švejkian” stupidity, which was actually meant to serve as a mirror held up to the mindless despotic power, or ordinary but dangerous human stupidity and pettiness (163).

Mendel also refers to specific episodes from Švejk, stating that “these scenes have the same value of testimony as when Nasreddin carries out a nonsensical order to the letter, or flatters the arrogant Timur Khan” (172). By comparing this Turkish folk

hero to a Czech literary icon, Mendel creates a point of comparison for the domestic reader to appreciate these stories from distant contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The metamorphoses that can be seen in the cross-cultural circulation of Nasreddin Hodja anecdotes become even more visible in these dramatic and fictional adaptations. In Bakhtin's terms, Solovyov's use of the Central Asian setting allows the "bluntness" that would not have been acceptable in a modern Russian context, while Kainar's ultimately tragic Nasreddin "reflects the private life" of the artist constrained by socialist realism. Despite their very different approaches, all of these writers attempt to transform Nasreddin Hodja's medieval Islamic spirit into something suitable for modern national literatures while preserving his essential comic qualities. Whether seen as exotic and remote (as in the Czech case) or as an integral part of the national culture (from the Bosnian perspective), this Turkish clown has given Slavic writers the freedom, often in times of extraordinary repression, to examine and critique contemporary society.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The pseudo-archaic title *al-Qalandar* refers to the sects of wandering Sufi dervishes known as Kalendars.
- <sup>2</sup> Wesselski was Bohemian German rather than "Czech," as he is sometimes described, but was nonetheless based for much of his career in Prague.
- <sup>3</sup> As Aykut notes, the Turkish lexical elements used by Sremac include both words still commonly used in Serbian today, such as *komşu* (neighbor), *sokak* (street), *fincan* (cup), *mahalle* (district), *kahvehane* (coffeehouse), etc., but also words supposedly less familiar to the contemporary reader, such as *avcı* (hunter), *dostluk* (friendship), *canım* (my dear), *toprak* (land), etc. (445).
- <sup>4</sup> Popovic also mentions an unpublished comedy by Milan Ćurčić, *Nasrudin hodžina čudesa* (The wonders of Nasreddin Hodja), performed in Sarajevo in 1928, and the Bosnian novelist Meša Selimović's introduction to a collection of Nasreddin Hodja anecdotes by Ahmet Halit Yaşaroğlu (1953), which was the first edition in Yugoslavia translated directly from Turkish. Among later works, Popovic recommends the study by Ivan Šop (1973). On Bosnian sources, see also Muftić (1994).
- <sup>5</sup> My acknowledgments to Dr. Srdjan Jovanović for his help with the original Bosnian (Serbo-Croatian) text.
- <sup>6</sup> In Balkan languages, words of Turkish origin often take on negative connotations: the term *insan* (which simply means "person" in Turkish) implies an "odd creature" in Serbian/Bosnian (as opposed to the standard Serbian *čovjek*, "man/person," in the title of the story).
- <sup>7</sup> Proof of Hitar Petar's status as a Bulgarian icon is a hill on Trinity Peninsula, the northernmost point of Antarctica, that was named Hitar Petar Nunatak (indirectly extending Nasreddin Hodja's cultural influence almost to the South Pole).
- <sup>8</sup> See Sagaev 1964 (my thanks to Dr. Nadezhda Alexandrova for this reference). Stoyanov also wrote an orchestral suite based on another Bulgarian national icon: the antihero Bai Ganyo, the satirical literary figure created by Aleko Konstantinov in the 1890s.
- <sup>9</sup> See Chapter 3 of my previous work (Sabatos 2014) for a more thorough discussion of Turkish themes among the multiethnic writers of interwar Czechoslovakia.

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### Nasreddin Hodja's foolish wisdom: Slavic literary adaptations of a Turkish folk hero

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Nasreddin Hodja. Slavic literature. Comparative literature. Turkish culture.

The Turkish comic folk hero Nasreddin Hodja is known across the Muslim and former Ottoman world, but he also has a unique place in modern Slavic literatures (Russian, Bosnian/Serbian, Bulgarian, and Czech). What is interesting in each of these works is the way that this character has been adapted as a transcultural icon, transforming his medieval Islamic spirit into something suitable for modern national literatures while preserving his essential comic qualities. Nasreddin's Slavic "afterlife" is not simply a forerunner of literary globalization, it also shows how exotic figures allow expanded freedom of expression under various forms of cultural repression.

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Charles Sabatos  
 Yeditepe University  
 Faculty of Arts and Sciences, no. 811  
 Department of English Literature  
 26 Ağustos Yerleşimi  
 34755 Kayışdağı  
 Istanbul  
 Turkey  
 charles.sabatos@gmail.com