



Germany And The Middle East

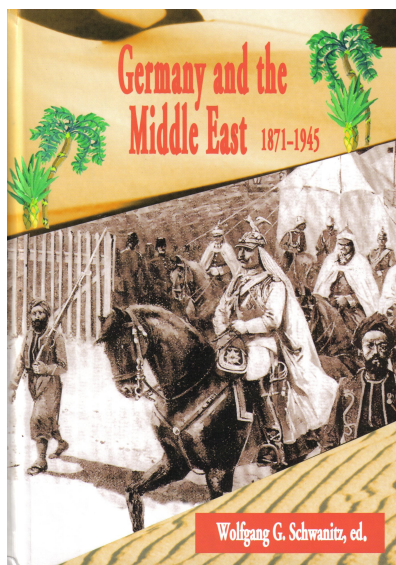
A valuable contribution about German foreign policy and the Middle East

Reviewed by

Walter Laqueur

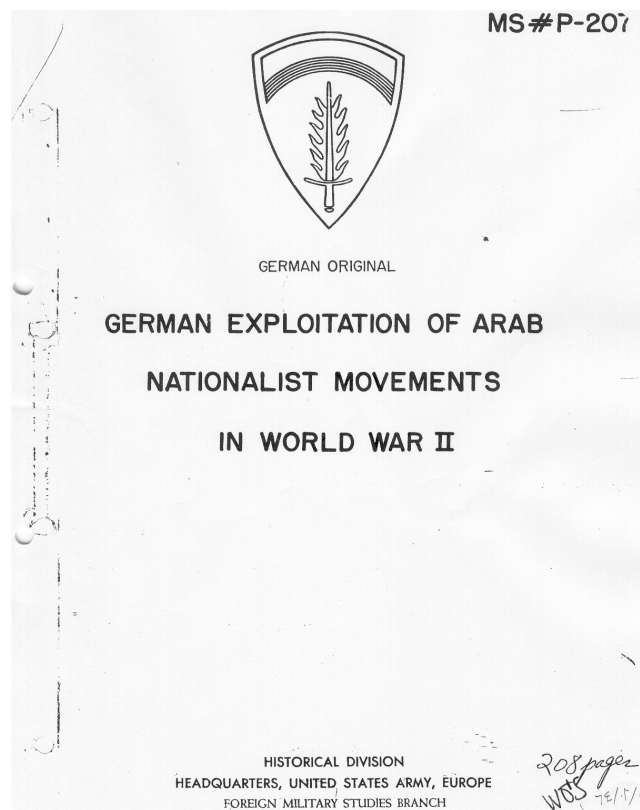
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There has been considerable German interest in and even fascination with the Near East on the cultural level since the eighteenth century, catering to all tastes ranging from Goethe and Friedrich Rueckert to Karl May, but in German foreign-policy thinking this region has played a modest role. True, Turkey was an ally during much of the time, Wilhelm II visited Palestine in 1898 (as did Franz Joseph of Austria before him), and the building of the Baghdad railway generated apprehension in French and British foreign ministries. But, by and large, it was believed about the Near East what Bismarck had said about the Balkans: it was not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier.



The geographical distance was great. Oil became a matter of importance in the 1930s, but the demand was not remotely as large as it is today. The great oil fields in the area of the Persian Gulf had not yet been discovered, and it was widely believed that Romania could supply all that was needed in peace and war. The Ottoman empire was an ally, or at least a friendly neutral, and this also limited German freedom of action. The fact that Franz von Papen, not exactly considered a political tower of strength, acted as German ambassador in Ankara during World War II indicates that no one in Berlin considered this a scene of great political importance or the base for daring new initiatives. Trade with countries such as Turkey and Iran was substantial in the 1930s — 47 percent of all imports into Iran came from Germany. But the volume was still quite small compared to trade with Germany's European neighbors. For most of the time (as Wolfgang G. Schwanitz writes in his survey) Germany followed the Bismarckian policy of the preservation of the status quo.

However, the region was also considered the soft underbelly of the British empire — as a bridge to India — and weakening the British position, be it in Afghanistan in World Wars I and II or in Iraq in 1940-41, became an issue of some importance. The essay by Hans-Ulrich Seidt on the general destabilization in the years following World War I, by Thomas Hughes on the German mission to Afghanistan in that war, and the contribution by Schwanitz on Fritz Grobba's activities in Baghdad in 1940-41 deal with this topic. They are based in part on hitherto unpublished material and shed interesting new light on developments insufficiently known until now. After his return from Soviet captivity in 1955, Grobba wrote a long report about his wartime activities, as did Generals Walter Warlimont and Hellmuth Felmy; use is made of these important sources.



If British and French foreign policy in the Middle East was aided by academic experts — historians, archaeologists and anthropologists — the same is true with regard to Germany, which at the time held a leading position in the field of Orientalistik. Some of the experts, such as Max von Oppenheim, had an adventurist vein. He was the main protagonist of a declaration of an (anti-British) jihad with admittedly greatly exaggerated hopes for what such a declaration could effect in a country such as India. General Niedermayer, who headed the German military mission to Afghanistan in World War I (and also to the Soviet Union in later years), was also a professor, a rare combination at this time in any country. John Buchan's famous thriller Greenmantle, describing a fictional German attempt to launch a holy war against Britain in the Muslim East, had a basis in fact, albeit a small one.

Yet another author, Uwe Pfullmann, deals with German relations with Saudi Arabia in the 1930s, a topic very much neglected in the past. Leopold Weiss (Mohammed Assad), a Viennese Jewish journalist who converted to Islam and became an influential Muslim theologian, is mentioned in this context; this intriguing figure has attracted notice in recent years, including a biography.

But Weiss-Assad, contrary to what Pfullmann reports, did not work for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (it did not exist at the time), and he left Pakistan, which he represented in the United Nations for a while, long before his death.

Perhaps the most interesting article, but also the most controversial, is the late Gerhard Hoepf's "In the Shadow of the Moon." Hoepf asks why there has been so much intensive coverage of the collaboration of Arab politicians with Nazi Germany and why Arab victims of Nazism have received no attention. But there has been little, if anything, written on the academic level about such collaboration because much of the relevant source material was not available until recently. As for the forgotten victims, Hoepf, on the basis of his research, reaches the conclusion that some 1,500 Arabs were sent to concentration camps. It is true that Nazi sources report the presence of prisoners of "Islamic faith" in the camps; among them were five Egyptians, four Iraqis, four Palestinians and one each from Syria and Lebanon. The rest, the overwhelming majority, were French residents or non-Arab citizens of North African origin.

Why had they been sent to concentration camps in the first place? There is no breakdown, but it would appear that many had volunteered for work in Germany or France or were drafted (Organization Todt), like hundreds of thousands of others, and –given the working conditions, the payment, the general treatment – they had absconded and were thus in breach of contract. Others were political prisoners who, according to Hoepf, had in some ways been connected with the French resistance. If so, their names should appear in the annals of the French resistance; however, with a few exceptions, they do not. The reasons for their arrest, in brief, remains something of a riddle.

Der Reichsführer-
Hauptamt - Amt D II
D 172 As.9h10 Sie/Prs

Berlin-Grünwald, den
Douglasstr. 7-11

26.06.44

Stur.1 Häftlinge islamitischen Glaubens - Gesamtzahl 1130.
Bezug: Diss.-Schreiben D II/2 9h Lu/Ma vom 26.6.44

An das
Reichssicherheitshauptamt - Amt IV
s.Hd. H-Hauptsturmführer B u r g
B e r l i n SW 11
Prinz-Albrecht-Str.8

Das Amt D II erinnert nochmals an das unter dem 26.6.44 gegebene Schreiben, wonach daran gebeten wurde, zu prüfen, ob ein Teil dieser islamitischen Häftlinge für eine Verwendung in der Waffen-H geeignet wären und herangezogen werden könnten. Des weiteren wurde daran gebeten, jeweils Unterrichtung des Reichsführers-H eine schriftliche Mitteilung nach hier zu geben. Als Grundlage zu dieser Nachprüfung war dem Schreiben eine Aufstellung über die in dem Lager befindlichen Häftlinge beigelegt. Um umgehende schriftliche Erledigung wird gebeten.

I.A.
H-Obersturmführer

How many of them survived? Again, there are no statistics. But, given the fact that most of them were sent not to extermination camps but to concentration camps (a difference Hoepf might have made a little clearer), there is reason to assume that many, probably the majority, survived. The attempt to draw attention to the existence of these victims of Nazi persecution is praiseworthy (and has been given due publicity by Al-Jazeera TV). It would have been even more convincing if the author had been a little more precise concerning their identity.

Whether all this will lead to a revision of existing views on German-Arab relations between 1933 and 1945, as Hoepf seems to believe, is yet another question. The sympathies for the Axis in the 1930s and early '40s among Arab nationalist circles were in many ways only natural. They were based on the assumption that the enemy of our enemies (Britain and the Jews) must be our political friends. However, those looking for antifascist sentiments (let alone activities) in these circumstances have their work cut out for them.

Altogether this volume is a valuable contribution to our knowledge about German foreign policy and the Middle East.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, ed.: Germany And The Middle East. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004, 267 pages, with selected documents, maps, bibliography, notes and index. \$89.95, hardcover.