

MERIA

FROM STATION Z TO JERUSALEM

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FROM STATION Z TO JERUSALEM

It began as another normal summer day in June 1942 at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin, the place where SS trainees were taken to see how the Master Race's captive enemies should be treated.¹ Three barracks in a separate section housed Jewish prisoners, mainly Polish citizens or men deported from Berlin. On that particular day, a squad of shouting guards ordered the Jewish prisoners of Barrack 38 to line up for four special visitors participating in an SS tour.²

As a model SS facility Sachsenhausen was run with the utmost efficiency and discretion. Whenever a prisoner was murdered or died, the nearby town's officials filled out a routine death certificate, as if his passage from life had been an ordinary one. Only the wafting smell of death from the cremation chimneys suggested otherwise.³ Yet this visit was handled with even greater care. Fritz Grobba, the Nazi regime's chief Middle East expert and liaison with its Arab allies, emphasized the event's importance. Everything must be perfect.⁴ So seriously did the Reich's leadership take this occasion that SS chief Heinrich Himmler personally drove to Sachsenhausen beforehand and took the planned tour himself.

The timing was carefully selected. In May, just one month earlier, the Germans had begun a new project in Sachsenhausen that they wanted to show off to their allies. It was codenamed Station Z. The choice of the letter "Z," the alphabet's last letter, was to symbolize that this place would mark the end of the road for Jews, not only in Sachsenhausen but throughout Europe.

For years, the Nazis had experimented with the best method for exterminating Jews and others. Starting with individual hangings, they moved on to shooting people in groups, more efficient but still slow. The breakthrough in mass producing death came in 1941 with the development of camouflaged gas chambers. These had just been installed at Sachsenhausen along with four new crematoria to speed up disposal of corpses. In May, Himmler ordered the killing of 250 Jews in the camp as a test run. The system worked flawlessly.⁵

And so, in June 1941, four special Arab guests visited the prototype for future death camps. Their interest had a very practical purpose. One day, they planned to create their own Station Z's in the Middle East near Tunis, Baghdad, and Jericho to eliminate all the Jews in the region.

That goal had been set in a January 1941 letter that Amin al-Husaini, the Palestine Arab political and religious leader, sent German Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Al-Husaini asked Hitler to help Arabs solve the Jewish question in their lands the way it was being done in Germany.⁶ To succeed they must learn the Nazis' techniques and obtain their technology.

This was why four officials from Germany's Arab allies were at Sachsenhausen in June 1942, preparing for the day they would return home behind Hitler's army. One interpretation of the documents has been that they were all aides, one of al-Husaini and three working for Germany's other main Arab ally, Rashid Ali al-Kailani, Iraq's former ruler who had been overthrown by a British invasion the previous year and fled to Berlin. The delegation's Palestinian Arab member would have

been either al-Husaini's security adviser, Safwat al-Husaini, or another nephew, Musa al-Husaini, who handled propaganda and agitation.

Another interpretation, however, is more dramatic: the four visitors might have included Germany's two main Arab allies in person--al-Husaini and al-Kailani--each with one aide. The evidence points to at least al-Kailani's personal presence.⁷ Grobba had written, "There shouldn't be concerns about the participation of al-Kailani himself in this inspection."⁸ Foreign Ministry Under Secretary Martin Luther asked "Why al-Kailani and his entourage had visited that camp."⁹ The visitors most likely, then, included al-Kailani, an Iraqi and a Palestinian Arab whom their bosses had assigned to the SS course, along with either a second Iraqi assistant or, less probably, al-Husaini himself.



Figure 1. On July 15, 1942, at his East Prussian headquarters near Rastenburg, Hitler meets the former Iraqi premier Rashid Ali al-Kailani, a member of the al-Qadiriyya brotherhood, which together with seven similar Islamist organizations played a key role in Berlin's Middle East policy from 1894 on. On May 15, 1942, al-Kailani promised Hitler in a secret letter "to fight the common enemy until final victory."

Whether or not he personally visited the death camp on that occasion, the grand mufti emerged as Nazi Germany's main Arab and Muslim ally. He and his entourage had first fled British arrest for stirring a bloody revolt in Palestine, and had then--after a stay as al-Kailani's guest in Baghdad--fled to Germany ahead of the British army. On November 28, 1941, Hitler gave al-Husaini a long audience as a mark of special favor, during which they agreed to cooperate in committing genocide against the Jews.

The path leading to that moment started in 1871, when Prussia led neighboring states into the creation of a united Germany. Arab intellectuals later saw this as a model for doing the same thing. Before World War I, Germany's monarch, the kaiser portrayed himself as patron of Muslims and Arabs. During the war, Germany fomented a jihad to encourage Muslims to fight on its side.

After the war, the thinking of Hitler and al-Husaini had developed along parallel lines. Both the grand mufti and Hitler developed the idea that only exterminating the Jews would let them achieve their goals.¹⁰ The two men each sought allies with a similar worldview.¹¹ When Hitler became Germany's chancellor in 1933, the grand mufti visited the German consulate in Jerusalem to offer cooperation. That same year, Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, was serialized in Arab newspapers and became a best-selling book.

Nazi Germany and its ideology became popular among Arabs for many reasons. They, too, saw themselves as a weak, defeated, and humiliated people, much like the Germans after World War I. Germany was also an enemy of Britain (which ruled Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq);

France (which ruled North Africa, Lebanon, and Syria); and the USSR (which had large Muslim-populated areas).

In addition, many Arabs hoped to copy Nazi Germany's seemingly magic formula for quickly becoming strong and victorious by having a powerful government mobilizing the masses by passionate patriotism, militant ideology, and hatred of scapegoats. That fascist Italy offered the same model reinforced the idea.

The grand mufti later wrote that many Arabs proclaimed, "Thank goodness, al-Hajj Muhammad Hitler has come."¹² The regimes that would later rule Iraq for forty years, Syria for fifty years, and Egypt for sixty years were all established by groups and leaders who had been Nazi sympathizers.

The alliance between these two forces was logical. Al-Husaini's 1936-39 Palestinian Arab rebellion received weapons from Berlin and money from Rome. In 1937, he urged Muslims to kill all the Jews living in Muslim lands, calling them "scum and germs."¹³ But al-Husaini's ambitions went further. He wanted German backing not only to wipe out the Jews in the Middle East but also to make him ruler over all Arabs. In exchange for Berlin's backing, he pledged to bring the Muslims and Arabs into an alliance with Germany; spread Nazi ideology; promote German trade; and "wage terror," in his own words, against the British and French.

The Nazis were eager for this partnership. They established special relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ba'th Party, the Young Egypt movement, and radical factions in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. Berlin also hoped to build links with the kings of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

In 1939, for example, Hitler met Saudi King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud's envoy, Khalid al-Qarqani, telling him: "We view the Arabs with the warmest sympathy for three reasons. First, we do not pursue any territorial aspirations in Arab lands. Second, we have the same enemies. And third, we both fight against the Jews. I will not rest until the very last of them has left Germany."

Al-Qarqani agreed, saying that the prophet Muhammad had acted similarly in driving all the Jews out of Arabia. A Muslim could make no more flattering comparison. Hitler asked al-Qarqani to tell his king that Germany wanted an alliance and would arm both Saudi Arabia and al-Husaini's men.¹⁴

But first, Hitler had to decide precisely how "the very last" of the Jews were to leave Germany. As late as 1941, Hitler thought this could happen, in the words of Hermann Goring in July, by "emigration or evacuation."¹⁵ Yet since other countries refused to take many or any Jewish refugees, Palestine was the only possible refuge, as designated by the League of Nations in 1922. If that last safe haven was closed, mass murder would be Hitler's only alternative.

The importance of the Arab-Muslim alliance for Berlin, along with the grand mufti's urging, ensured that outcome. And al-Husaini would be present at the critical moment Hitler chose it. In November 1941, al-Husaini arrived in Berlin to a reception showing the Germans saw him as future leader of all Arabs and Muslims, perhaps even reviver of the Islamic caliphate. He was housed in the luxurious Castle Bellevue, once home to Germany's crown prince and today the official residence of Germany's president.

Al-Husaini was paid for his personal and political needs an amount equivalent to about twelve million dollars a year in today's values.¹⁶ The funds were raised by selling gold seized from Jews sent to concentration camps.¹⁷ Following this pattern, al-Husaini requested and received as his office an expropriated Jewish apartment. His staff was housed in a half-dozen other houses provided by the Germans. In addition, al-Husaini was given a suite in Berlin's splendid Hotel Adlon and, for vacations, luxurious accommodations at the Hotel Zittau and Oybin Castle in Saxony.¹⁸

On the German side, Grobba was his guide and handler; Ernst von Weizsäcker, a state secretary and SS general, his liaison with the Foreign Ministry. Von Weizsäcker preferred courting Turkey rather than the Arabs since it had a large army--thirty-six brigades easily expandable to fifty--while all Arab countries combined had just seven, and those mostly under British officers.¹⁹



Figure 2. Hitler in conversation with Grand Mufti al-Hajj Amin al-Husaini, November 28, 1941. At their meeting they concluded the pact of Jewish genocide in Europe and the Middle East, and immediately afterward, Hitler gave the order to prepare for the Holocaust. The next day invitations went out to thirteen Nazis for the Wannsee Conference to begin organizing the logistics of this mass murder.

But Hitler had a higher opinion of the grand mufti's value. All his other Arab or Muslim partners had followers in just one country; al-Husaini had transnational influence. The grand mufti sought to prove himself worthy of these high expectations. At the Bellevue, he met not only Arab politicians but also exiled Muslim leaders from the USSR, India, Afghanistan, and the Balkans.

Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop was impressed, telling al-Husaini, "We have watched your fight for a long time. We have always admired you, fascinated by your dangerous adventures..." Von Ribbentrop assured al-Husaini of the Reich's support.²⁰ The Germans accepted al-Husaini's claim that the Arab masses would rally to their side if Berlin guaranteed independence from British and French rule as well as stopping all Jewish immigration into Palestine. In March 1941, Berlin secretly promised to support Arab independence.²¹ In October, Berlin and Rome publicly announced that policy.²²

Among themselves, German officials called al-Husaini the most important Muslim cleric and leader of the Arabs in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Transjordan (today Jordan), Iraq, and elsewhere.²³ Hitler called him the "principal actor of the Middle East, a realist, not a dreamer."²⁴ A contemporary U.S. intelligence assessment agreed, claiming al-Husaini was seen throughout the Middle East as "the greatest leader of the Arab peoples now alive."²⁵

In recognition of this estimate, Hitler gave al-Husaini a ninety-minute meeting on November 28, 1941. Hitler's preparatory briefing, written by Grobba, stressed that al-Husaini was in tune with Germany's ideological and strategic interests.²⁶ The red carpet was rolled out with the Nazi regime's considerable talent for dramatic pomp. The grand mufti stepped from his limousine to see a two-hundred-man honor guard and a band playing military music. Hitler greeted him warmly, "I am most familiar with your life."

His Arab guest returned the compliments, pleased to find Hitler not only a powerful speaker but also a patient listener. Al-Husaini thanked the German dictator for long supporting the Palestinian Arab cause. The Arabs, he asserted, were Germany's natural friends, believed it would win the war, and were ready to help. Al-Husaini explained his plan to Hitler. He would recruit an Arab Legion to fight for the Axis; Arab fighters would sabotage Allied facilities while Arab and Muslim leaders would foment revolts to tie up Allied troops and add territory and resources for the Axis.

Hitler accepted, saying the alliance would help his life-and-death struggle with the two citadels of Jewish power: Great Britain and Soviet Russia. At that moment, the Third Reich was at the height of its victories. German forces were advancing deep inside the Soviet Union and nearer its border with Iran. General Erwin Rommel was moving into Egypt and many Egyptians thought Cairo might soon fall. When the day of German victory came, Hitler continued, Germany would announce the Arabs'

liberation. The grand mufti would become leader of most Arabs. All Jews in the Middle East would be killed.²⁷ When al-Husaini asked for a written agreement, Hitler replied that he had just given him his personal promise and that should be sufficient.²⁸

For al-Husaini, the meeting could not have gone better. Not only was the might of triumphant Germany, Europe's master, sponsoring the Arab cause, but the world's most powerful man was backing him personally. Hitler was also pleased. Afterward, he called al-Husaini "the principal actor in the Middle East," a sly fox, a realist, and--with his blond hair and blue eyes--an Aryan, too. And so Hitler forgave al-Husaini what the German leader called his sharp and mouse-like countenance.²⁹

Germany's certification of the grand mufti as its candidate to be Arab and Muslim leader was confirmed in a uniquely Nazi manner. The day after the meeting, the grand mufti went to see a physician, Dr. Pierre Schruppf, whose thorough physical checkup lasted six hours. The doctor concluded that al-Husaini was no mere Arab but a Circassian, thus a Caucasian, and hence an Aryan. His pseudoscientific diagnosis rested on distinctively unphysical reasoning. An Arab could never have kept up the battle against the British and Jews, the doctor explained, but would have sold out to them. Al-Husaini's steadfastness proved he was an Aryan. And since he was an Aryan he would be a faithful ally for Nazi Germany.³⁰

But there was another consequence of the al-Husaini-Hitler meeting to cement their alliance. A few hours after seeing the grand mufti Hitler ordered invitations sent for a conference to be held at a villa on Lake Wannsee. The meeting's purpose was to plan the comprehensive extermination of all Europe's Jews.

Considerations of Muslim and Arab alliances, of course, were by no means the sole factor in a decision that grew from Hitler's own anti-Semitic obsession. But until that moment the German dictator had left open the chance that expulsion might be an alternative to extermination.

When Hitler first told Heydrich to find a "final solution," the dictator had included expelling the Jews as an option. Already, the regime estimated, it had let about 500,000 Jews leave Germany legally during seven years of Nazi rule. Yet if the remaining Jews could only go to Palestine, and since ending that immigration was al-Husaini's top priority, emigration or expulsion would sabotage the German-Arab alliance.³¹ Given the combination of the strategic situation and Hitler's personal views, choosing to kill the Jews and gain the Arab and Muslim assets necessary for his war effort was an easy decision.³²

Consequently, Hitler ordered the Wannsee Conference to devise a detailed plan for genocide.³³ Since this decision was linked to the alliance with al-Husaini he would be the first non-German informed about the plan, even before it was formally presented at the conference. Adolf Eichmann himself was assigned to this task.

Eichmann briefed al-Husaini in the SS headquarters map room, using the presentation prepared for the conference. The grand mufti, Eichmann's aide recalled, was very impressed, so taken with this blueprint for genocide that al-Husaini asked Eichmann to send an expert--probably Dieter Wisliceny--to Jerusalem to be his own personal adviser for setting up death camps and gas chambers once Germany won the war and he was in power.³⁴

As a first step, it was agreed that once Rommel captured Egypt, an SS unit commanded by Walther Rauff, Heydrich's thirty-five-year-old aide who had developed mobile gassing vans, would arrive in Cairo to eliminate the Jews there before following the Wehrmacht into Palestine for an encore.³⁵ In June 1942, Rauff did begin this project, killing twenty-five hundred Jews in German-occupied Tunisia. If the Germans had taken Egypt and then Palestine, this would have been the rehearsal for larger operations. With German armies approaching the Middle East near the Libya-Egypt and Soviet-Iran borders, the idea that within a year German-advised Arabs might have murdered all of the Jews in the region seemed realistic.

And that was why an Arab delegation was invited for a preview at the Sachsenhausen camp. They were briefed by the camp's SS commander, Colonel Hans Loritz, who, with eight years' experience, was the Reich's top expert in running concentration camps. After fielding questions he led the tour of

the barracks, eating halls, washrooms, kitchens, and dispensary. Leaving nothing to chance, the Germans had prepared a dramatic event. A group of sixty Soviet officers, singing enthusiastically, marched out of the camp dressed in new German army uniforms. These were, Loritz explained, prisoners of war who had volunteered to fight the Communist regime.³⁶ The guests got the message. Everyone wanted to be on the winning side, and if Germany could turn Soviet officers against Stalin, Arabs could recruit Muslims to fight Churchill.

One German official, however, was horrified by that visit. The Foreign Ministry's undersecretary, Martin Luther, demanded that Arabs not be allowed into any concentration camp lest they tell others about what they saw. If Germany's enemies discovered mass murder was happening they would use this as a propaganda weapon against the Third Reich.

Luther, a party veteran, also worried that leaks would sabotage his job of convincing German satellite or allied states to turn over their Jews for transport to the death camps. If word got out, those regimes might balk at cooperating due either to Allied pressure or to fear of future punishment.³⁷ In-furiated, Luther complained to Grobba that von

Ribbentrop had promised him the visit wouldn't happen.³⁸ Luther's request to suspend this particular tour was denied.³⁹ The SS promised him there would be no more tours in future but held them anyway, including a likely later visit by al-Husaini to Auschwitz.⁴⁰ As for Luther, in 1943 he went too far in conspiring to replace von Ribbentrop's job and was sent to Sachsenhausen himself.

The importance of Nazi Germany's connections with Arab and Muslim allies was quite clear to Hitler and most of his lieutenants. They saw this alliance as vital to their war effort and the key to conquering the Middle East. Hitler thought al-Husaini would emerge as leader of a vast Arab empire that would be his junior partner. Yet what was the background of this German fixation with Arab revolts and Islamic jihad, and precisely how did this alliance develop on both sides?

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NOTES

¹ PArchAA, R100702. From a July 28, 1942, note by Fritz Grobba we infer that the visit described here took place between June 26 and July 17, 1942.

² According to one document, the visitors were "three of al-Kailani's men." Grobba said it was "three staffers of al-Kailani and one of al-Husaini" and on a third occasion the document referred to "four Arabs." PArchAA, R100702, F1784-85, Zu Pol VII 6447g II, B611978, "Notiz für Gesandtschaftsrat Granow, drei Begleiter al-Kailanis, bedauerlich, zumal Herr RAM sich angeschlossen hat, solche Einrichtungen nicht zu zeigen, Berlin, 06.06.1942, gez. Gödde." PArchAA, R100702, F1784-85, Zu Pol VII 6447g I Metropol: I, B611979.

³ Günter Morsch and Astrid Ley, eds., *Das Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen 1936-1945* (Berlin: Metropol, 2008), 170, 176, 178.

⁴ On the visit of four Arabs to the concentration camp 'Sachsenhausen' near Oranienburg," Berlin, July 17, 1942. See also Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, ed., *Germany and the Middle East, 1871-1945* (Princeton: Wiener, 2004), 218-220.

⁵ Morsch and Ley, *Das Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen*, 101-110.

- ⁶ Amin al-Husaini, *Mudhakkirat al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini* [The memoirs of al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini], ed. Abd al-Karim al-Umar (Damascus: Al-Ahali, 1999), 74.
- ⁷ PArchAA, R100702, F1784-85, “Wunsch Kailanis ein KZ zu besichtigen, Berlin, 6/26/42, gez. Grobba.”
- ⁸ PArchAA, R100702, F1784-85, “Wunsch Kailanis ein KZ zu besichtigen, Berlin, 6/26/42, gez. Grobba.”
- ⁹ PArchAA, R100702, F1784-85, Zu Pol VII 6447g II, B611976, “Notiz für Herrn Grobba (im Auftrag von U.St.S. Martin Luther), Geheim, Berlin, 7/24/1942, gez. Gösde.”
- ¹⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Mariner, 1999), 307; al-Husaini, *Mudhakkirat*, 94, 414-415.
- ¹¹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 610, 619. 12.
- ¹² Al-Husaini, *Mudhakkirat*, 73.
- ¹³ “Ein Angebot an die zuständigen Stellen in Deutschland,” *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik*, 63 vols. (Baden-Baden: Imprimerie Nationale, 1950-1996), ser. D,5:655-656 (offer for agreement, nine points by the Grand Mufti and Syrian Arabs); “Islam und Judentum,” in *Islam--Bolschewismus*, ed. Muhammad Sabri (Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt, 1938), 22-32 (grand mufti’s call to the Islamic world of 1937).
- ¹⁴ PArchAA, N6, R104795, “Aufzeichnung, Empfang des Sondergesandten von König Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud auf dem Berghof des Königlichen Rats Khalid Al Hudal-Qarqani, Berlin 20.06.1939, gez. Hentig.”
- ¹⁵ PArchWGS, Jewish Question, Hermann Göring to Reinhard Heydrich, Berlin, July 31, 1941, signed Göring.
- ¹⁶ PArchWGS, Office Of Chief Of Counsel For War Crimes, Doc. No. NG-5462-5570, Eidesstattliche Erklärung (sworn statement on financial affairs of Germany’s Arab guests), Carl Rekowski, Bremen, October 5, 1947, 1-10.
- ¹⁷ Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, *Gold, Bankiers und Diplomaten: Zur Geschichte der Deutschen Orientbank 1906-1946* (Berlin: Trafo, 2002), 100, 113, 148, 299.
- ¹⁸ Al-Husaini, *Mudhakkirat*, 104.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ²¹ USArchII, T120, R901, F61123, “Entwurf eines dem Sekretär des Großmuftis mitzubehaltenden Schreibens im Namen des Führers als Antwort auf den Brief vom 20.01.1941, geheim, Berlin, März 1941 [later dated April 8, 1941], gez. Weizsäcker.”
- ²² German-Italian broadcast declaration on Arab independence, aired October 21, 1941.
- ²³ USArchII, T120, R901, F61123, “Die Person des Großmufti, geheime Reichssache, Berlin, März 1941,” 72-73.
- ²⁴ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Hitler’s Table Talk, 1941-1944*, rev. ed. (New York: Enigma, 2008), 412.
- ²⁵ USArchII, RG165, B3055, OSS code cablegram, “Grand Mufti, Cairo, confidential,” May 19, 1941.
- ²⁶ USArchII, T120, R63571, R50682, “Der Großmufti von Jerusalem,” Berlin, 11/28/41”; al-Husaini, *Mudhakkirat*, 108.
- ²⁷ Al-Husaini, *Mudhakkirat*, 113.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Trevor-Roper, *Hitler’s Table Talk*, 412.
- ³⁰ BArchPAA, F56474, Bericht, 351003-351007.
- ³¹ Corry Guttstadt, *Die Türkei, die Juden und der Holocaust* (Hamburg: Assoziation A, 2008), 248, 256.
- ³² *Ibid.*

³³ PArchWGS, protocol of the Wannsee Conference, Berlin-Wannsee, January 20, 1942, online at http://www.ghwk.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf-wannsee/protokoll-januar1942.pdf.

³⁴ "Betr. Grossmufti von Jerusalem," written statement by Wisliceny at Nuremberg, July 26, 1946, in Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, *Amin al-Husaini und das Dritte Reich* (Lawrenceville, N.J., 2008), <http://www.trafoberlin.de/pdf-Neu/Amin%20al-Husaini%20und%20das%20Dritte%20Reich%20WGS.pdf>, 1-10.

³⁵ Wolfgang G. Schwanitz: "Amin al-Husaini and the Holocaust: What Did the Grand Mufti Know?" *World Politics Review Exclusive*, May 8, 2008, <http://www.trafoberlin.de/pdf-Neu/Amin%20al-Husaini%20and%20the%20Holocaust.pdf>, 1-10.

³⁶ Schwanitz, *Germany and the Middle East*, 218-220.

³⁷ Morsch and Ley, *Das Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen*, 174.

³⁸ PArchAA, R100702, F1784-85, Zu Pol VII 6447g II, B611976.

³⁹ PArchAA, R100702, F1784-85, Zu Pol VII 6447g II, B611977.

⁴⁰ Astrid Ley and Günther Morsch, eds., *Medizin und Verbrechen: Das Krankenrevier des KZ Sachsenhausen 1936-1945* (Berlin: Metropol, 2007), 391-392.