

Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East -

by Barry Rubin & Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

reviewed by Matthias Küntzel

Few topics are a source of such controversy among historians of the Middle East as the question of the extent of the wartime relationship between the Nazis and the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin el-Husaini, and of the significance of those ties to the evolution of developments in the Middle East from 1945 to the present day.

Some view the collaboration between Nazi and Arab leaders as a mere footnote to history. Others consider this period crucial to understanding the current antisemitism in the region and the ongoing escalation of the Middle East conflict.

The very title of this book indicates the position taken by the distinguished German Middle East historian Wolfgang G. Schwanitz and the prolific Israeli Middle East expert Barry Rubin, who died prematurely in 2014. For them, the ongoing influence of the Nazi period on the Middle East of today is an established fact. However, what distinguishes *Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* from other books on this topic is the long historical period examined by the authors, ranging from the early days of the German Empire to the present time.

The chronologically structured text—divided into twelve chapters, enriched by nearly 1,200 footnotes, and illustrated with thirty photographs and facsimiles—is a compelling read. A concise opening chapter is followed by a fifty-page section (Chapters II and III) dealing with the idea of “A Jihad Made in Germany” promoted by Kaiser Wilhelm during World War I. This is a subject on which Schwanitz is an undisputed expert.

We learn, for example, about the November 1914 memorandum by the German Orientalist Max von Oppenheim that not only advocated an alliance with Turkey but also recommended the incitement of Muslims to jihad in order to strike Britain and Russia in their colonial hinterlands. Oppenheim’s proposal found favor with the German leadership. As a result, during World War I, his office “produced over one thousand publications in nine European and twelve Middle Eastern and Asian languages ... and distributed three million copies of books, newspapers, journals, pamphlets, and leaflets” in favor of jihad (p. 39).

The next fifty pages (Chapters III and IV) deal with the interwar period and demonstrate that Germany remained a center of support for the jihad idea: “It 40 was in Berlin that radical Islamists for the first time confronted and defeated more moderate Muslims, developed their ideology and propaganda, and constructed international networks” (p. 78).

Nazis and Islam

The longest section of the book (Chapters V–IX) deals with the Nazis’ various efforts during the World War II to mobilize Muslims and use them for their own ends. The authors reveal countless new and valuable details about the Mufti’s activities in Berlin: They name the members of the secret “Arab Committee for Cooperation” led by the Mufti (p. 123) and explain that in July 1943, Heinrich Himmler met the Mufti and told him that three million Jews had already been murdered. Much of this information stems from the Mufti’s autobiography, which is still only available in the Arabic-language original.

Finally, the authors devote sixty pages to demonstrating the “continuity of institutions, ideology, and personnel” (p. 248) that they believe began in 1915 with the “German jihad.” It peaked with the alliance between Hitler and al-Husaini, and continues to influence the Middle East—whether in nationalist or Islamist guise—to the present day.

We learn new details about the efforts to protect the Mufti from prosecution after 1945—efforts that were successful and allowed him to conduct “the new war against the Jews” (p. 199), this time against Israel. Although the authors mention the key years of this new war—1946 to 1949—only in passing, the facts they cite are of interest: In 1948, the Mufti’s followers retrieved “the Nazi arms al-Husaini’s men had hidden in Egypt’s desert for use in the projected 1942 pro-German revolt” in order to use them now against Israel (p. 199). In 1951, the Mufti founded the League of Jihad Call in Cairo and resumed his collaboration with the leading Iranian Islamists who paved the way for Khomeini.

“It might seem excessive to assert that there would have been no 1948 and no Arab–Israeli conflict without al-Husaini and his allies,” the authors conclude. “Yet no one individual made this outcome more likely than him” (p. 200). For this assessment, the authors provide convincing support; one would have wished that they had always drawn their conclusions so carefully.

The Mufti and the Wannsee Conference

Unfortunately, that is not the case, as in, for example, their entirely unconvincing thesis about the Mufti’s purportedly key role in the Wannsee Conference.

It is a well-documented fact that the Mufti condemned thousands of Jews to be murdered in the Holocaust by blocking their escape routes. Schwanzitz and Rubin, however, go further and declare that the only personal meeting between Hitler and al-Husaini of November 28, 1941 was the turning point at which the Holocaust began: “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,” according to the opening chapter of their book (p. 6).

In the course of their study they elaborate further on this thesis: After the meeting with el-Husaini, “Hitler made a fifth decision that would end millions of lives. He ordered Heydrich to organize a conference within ten days to prepare the ‘final solution of the Jewish question.’ Thus, Hitler made his key decision to start the genocide with al-Husaini’s anti-Jewish rhetoric and insistence on wiping out the Jews fresh in his ears (p. 162).

It is true that Heydrich’s invitation to the Wannsee Conference was dated November 29, 1941—the day after the Mufti’s conversation with Hitler. This was, however, not a hasty decision. Heydrich referred in his conference invitation to a written order by Herman Goering dated July 31, 1941, in which the latter requested “a general plan about the ... implementation of the desired final solution of the Jewish question.” Regrettably, Goering’s request, made at a time when the Mufti was not yet in Germany, receives no mention in the book.

The authors’ thesis also ignores the manifold results of research into the Holocaust that have long since led to the abandonment of the idea of a Hitlerian “key decision.” The crimes of the Holocaust unfolded in stages and started long before the Hitler–Mufti meeting and the Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942: In September 1941, 34,000 Jews from Kiev were murdered within two days at Babi Yar. In early November 1941, the Nazis started to kill people in specially constructed trucks through the introduction of exhaust gases; the decision to prepare for this kind of mass murder had already been taken in late September. At the same time—four weeks before the Mufti–Hitler meeting—the SS began construction of the Belzec extermination camp in German-occupied Poland. The Nazis needed no encouragement from the Mufti to implement all these and future measures.

The link between the Hitler–Mufti meeting and the decision on the Holocaust, presented by the authors as a fact, is nothing but speculation. Aside from this problem, however, the book also raises questions that merit further discussion. Thus, the authors justifiably complain that Hitler’s ideas about the Middle East have been neglected in the vast literature devoted to him.

A Kaiser-Hitler continuity?

Both authors claim that Hitler's Eastern policy was a continuation of the imperial jihad, which had begun with Max von Oppenheim and the Kaiser. "The future dictator," they write about the Hitler of the 1920s, "was already thinking of Arabs and Muslims as reliable allies" (p. 77). However, this is doubtful. In 1926, Adolf Hitler published the second part of *Mein Kampf* in which he condemned the Kaiser's jihad strategy as a "foreign policy mistake." He ridiculed "the hopes for the legendary uprising in Egypt" and dismissed the insurgents as "garrulous windbags" and "puffed-up Orientals." He went on to write, "The 'holy war' can give our German dumb clucks the pleasant sensation that now others are willing to bleed for us." It would be impossible, however, "to storm a powerful state with a coalition of cripples." These statements are not discussed, nor even mentioned, in the book.

Schwanitz and Rubin claim: "From the Third Reich's standpoint, the evolving political situation made an alliance with Islamism and jihad an even more attractive strategy than it had been in the Kaiser's day. German writers and Nazi ideologues stressed the viability of the Islamist movement; diplomats, military officers, and intelligence officials who had worked with Muslims in World War I ... still believed in the strategy originally developed by von Oppenheim and the Kaiser" (p. 86).

This claim is greatly exaggerated. True, there had been such voices, but they remained isolated for a long time. Indeed, under the Nazis, von Oppenheim suffered discrimination as a "half-Jew." The memorandum he nonetheless presented to the Foreign Ministry in July 1940 criticized German disinterest in Middle Eastern affairs and recommended support for the Arab revolution against Great Britain. It was ignored by the Foreign Office.

Moreover, in August 1940, the Foreign Ministry issued a circular announcing that the reorganization of the Arab world would be left up to Italy. However, Arab representatives, it went on to say, should be kept in the dark about the German disinterest. In addition, the head of the Foreign Ministry's political department, SS leader Ernst Woermann, who signed this circular, put forward a memorandum regarding the Arab question, explicitly stressing that "given the current distribution of powers, the 'Islamic Thought' ('Holy War') cannot be used." Again, Woermann's instructions are not mentioned in the book.

It is true that some leading Nazis were fascinated by Islam, that the Nazis' Arabic-language radio propaganda began to play the "Islamic card" as early as 1939, and that the SS took energetic steps to functionalize Islam from the end of 1942 onward. The author's continuity thesis, however, does not fully take into account the contradictory nature of these processes. It gives the German Arab policy a coherence that it did not really possess.

The problem of discontinuity versus continuity also affects the treatment of the topic of “Islamism.” It is to the authors’ credit that they address the jihad movement of World War I and connect it with the Muslim Brotherhood’s jihad. Is it really credible, however, to describe the Muslim Brotherhood as “an organization rooted in the Ottoman-German jihadization of Islam” (p. 70)? This is an open and important question for future debates.

Therefore, it is difficult not to react to this book with ambivalence. On the one hand, it provides some very valuable information from hitherto undiscovered sources culled from archives in Germany, the United States, Britain, the former Yugoslavia, Israel, and Russia. Rubin and Schwanitz provide a fresh picture of the interaction between Europe and the Islamic world and enrich the debate about discontinuity and continuity in the Middle East. On the other hand, they sometimes forcefully impose their overblown theses on the sources. Thus, the informed reader has the feeling that certain facts that do not fit the picture have simply been left out. This damages the book’s credibility and remains problematic, however much one might be inclined to share the authors’ central assumptions.

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