

HT 2016: New Muslim Communities in Europe, 1918 – 1945

Veranstalter: Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands (VHD); Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands (VGD)

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„New Muslim Communities in Europe, 1918 – 1945“ was the title of a panel organized by Marc David Baer (LSE, London) in this year’s annual meeting of the Deutscher Historikertag which took place in Hamburg under the motto „Matters of Faith“. The four papers of the panel attempted to address and reflect upon the leading theme of the conference by exploring the place, role, and significance of the Muslim presence in Europe during the interwar years for the history of Islam in Western societies on the one hand, and the connected histories of South and Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe, on the other.

In the panel’s first paper, „Rethinking Islam Beyond the Nationalist Realm – Muslims in Interwar Berlin and The Beginnings of Modern European Islam,“ MEHDI SAJID (Utrecht) discussed the case of the Muslim communities in Germany between the two world wars. Conceived as a general introduction to the theme of the panel, Sajid’s paper began by questioning the dominant perception that links the beginnings of the Muslim presence in Germany to the coming of the later guest workers in the 1950s and 1960s. That Muslims had been living in Germany and participating in its socio-cultural and political life for more than half a century before the first Muslim guest worker set foot in the country continues to be a fact that is known only to few experts and interested parties, he argued. By drawing on various examples (such as, for instance, the construction in 1924 of the oldest still existing mosque in Berlin, the conversion of numerous Germans to Islam, the existence of Muslim cemeteries, publications, and several cases of inter-religious and inter-ethnic marriages), the paper gave a glimpse of the cultural richness of the Muslim presence in Germany during the interwar years. It closed with a reflection about the benefits of studying and re-discovering this culturally

rich episode of Muslim history not only in regard to the ongoing tense discussions about the presence and the future of Islam in Germany, but also to help „old“ and „new“ migrants develop a common „German-Muslim“ vision for their future.

The second paper of the panel, given by UMAR RYAD (Utrecht) and entitled „Mediators: European Converts and Muslim Sectarianism in Inter-war Europe“, addressed the sectarian disputes that were triggered by the conversion of Europeans to the Ahmadiyya branch of Islam across the continents. Ryad focused on the Islamic Egyptian press to give an example of the transnational echo of the missionary success of the Ahmadiyya movement among Europeans. Drawing on several articles from Muhammad Rashid Rida’s *al-Manar* and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib’s *al-Fath*, arguably the most influential Salafi journals in interwar Cairo, the paper showed how the issue of the European converts led to several important debates in the Middle Eastern Islamic centers. Sparked initially by the religious hybridity of the European „new-comers“ to Islam, many of these debates revolved around the doctrines and the missionary success of the Ahmadiyya movement in Europe. Ryad’s paper is a good reminder of the significance of transnational and transcultural approaches in the study of Islamic movements, because what happens in Europe impacts Muslim majority societies – and vice versa. In fact, Europe became in the interwar years the arena in which different Islamic ideologies, for instance the Salafiyya and the Ahmadiyya, entered into fierce competition to make Islam relevant in modern societies.

With the third paper of the panel, entitled „Protestant Islam in Weimar Germany: Hugo Marcus and ‘The Message of the Holy Prophet Muhammad to Europe’“, MARC DAVID BAER (London) brought a refreshing new tone into the discussion about European converts. His paper explored the Islam envisioned in the writings of one of the most prominent German converts to the Ahmadiyya, the Jewish poet, philosopher, and political activist Hugo Marcus (1880-1966). The latter’s vision offers a very interesting case of a utopian project of an „Islam for Germany“, i.e. a blend of Muslim and Ger-

man values with Nietzschean philosophy – the whole rooted in Goethe’s views of Islam. Baer explained that this Goethean understanding of Islam (with its alleged faith in the intellect and in progress) was the ideological foundation upon which Marcus envisioned a German Islam that would serve both as „the religion of the German past and the religion of the future“. The paper gives surprising insights into the hermeneutical dynamics and the various interpretations that emerged among European converts to Islam in Europe after the First World War. It shows that the European Muslim discourse was not only shaped by „Eastern“ views, such as those of the Ahmadiyya or the Salafiyya, but also by some very Eurocentric and even Germanic ones.

The panel’s fourth and last paper was DAVID MOTADEL (London), „Alimjan Idris and Islam in four Germanys, 1916-1959“. The paper focused on the life of Islamic scholar Alimjan Idris and offered another fascinating example of Muslim figures who shaped the history and politics of Islam in Germany in the twentieth century. Originally from Central Asia, Idris entered the service of the Ottoman War Ministry during the First World War. In 1916 he was sent to Germany, where he became involved in German propaganda activities towards the Islamic world and was made responsible for Muslims in special prisoners of war camps near Berlin. Idris stayed in the German capital after 1918 and became a key figure in the Muslim community in Weimar Germany. After the Nazis came to power, he became heavily involved in propaganda activities again, first for the Foreign Office, later for other branches of the regime. During the Second World War he was once more responsible for Muslim prisoners of war and Muslim volunteers in the Wehrmacht. In 1944 he became director of the so-called ‘SS-Mullah School’ in Dresden, which trained military imams for service in the German army. After 1945 Idris was a key figure in the organization of the first post-war Muslim community in Germany, based in Munich. By exploring the intriguing career of Alimjan Idris in the four Germanys, the paper provided a unique lens through which to re-examine the evolution of Islam and Muslim affairs in Germany.

Motadel argued that „no person shaped the history of Islam in early twentieth-century Germany more than Idris“. By interweaving the biography of Idris with broader questions about exile, religious minorities and the politics of Islam, the paper shed new light on the history of Islam in Europe’s age of extremes.”

Session Overview:

Session conveners: Marc David Baer (London)

Mehdi Sajid (Utrecht): Rethinking Islam Beyond the Nationalist Realm— Muslims in Inter-war Berlin and the Beginnings of Modern European Islam

Umar Ryad (Utrecht): The Interaction Between the Ahmadiyya (India), Salafiyya and European Converts in the Interwar Period

Marc David Baer (London): Protestant Islam in Weimar Germany: Hugo Marcus and »The Message of the Holy Prophet Muhammad to Europe«

David Motadel (Cambridge): The Entangled Histories of Muslims, Jews and Jewish Converts to Islam in German-Occupied Paris

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