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Book Review

“Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination” by Stefan Ihrig, Harvard, \$29.95, 311 pages.

“Islam and Nazi Germany’s War” by David Motadel, Harvard, \$35, 500 pages.

Why Hitler Wished He Was Muslim

The Führer admired Atatürk’s subordination of religion to the state—and his ruthless treatment of minorities.



Muslim recruits of the SS Handzar Division pray in 1943. Harvard University Press; German Archives

by Dominic Green

‘It’s been our misfortune to have the wrong religion,” Hitler complained to his pet architect Albert Speer. “Why did it have to be Christianity, with its meekness and flabbiness?” Islam was a *Männerreligion*—a “religion of men”—and hygienic too. The “soldiers of Islam” received a warrior’s heaven, “a real earthly paradise” with “houris” and “wine flowing.” This, Hitler argued, was much more suited to the “Germanic temperament” than the “Jewish filth and priestly twaddle” of Christianity.

For decades, historians have seen Hitler’s Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 as emulating Mussolini’s 1922 March on Rome. Not so, says Stefan Ihrig in “Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination.” Hitler also had Turkey in mind—and not just the 1908 march of the Young Turks on Constantinople, which brought down a government. After 1917, the bankrupt, defeated and cosmopolitan Ottoman Empire contracted into a vigorous “Turanic” nation-state. In the early 1920s, the new Turkey was the first “revisionist” power to opt out of the postwar system, retaking lost lands on the Syrian coast and control over the Strait of the Dardanelles. Hitler, Mr. Ihrig writes, saw Turkey as the model of a “prosperous and völkisch modern state.”

Through the 1920s and 1930s, Nazi publications lauded Turkey as a friend and forerunner. In 1922, for example, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party’s weekly paper, praised Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the “Father of the Turks,” as a “real man,” embodying the “heroic spirit” and the *Führerprinzip*, or führer principle, that demanded absolute obedience. Atatürk’s subordination of Islam to the state anticipated Hitler’s strategy toward Christianity. The Nazis presented Turkey as stronger for having massacred its Armenians and expelling its Greeks. “Who,” Hitler asked in August 1939, “speaks today of the extermination of the Armenians?”

This was not Germany’s first case of *Türkenfieber*, or Turk fever. Turkey had slid into World War I not by accident but because Germany had greased the tracks: training officers, supplying weapons, and drawing the country away from Britain and France. Hitler wanted to repeat the Kaiser’s experiment in search of a better result. By 1936, Germany supplied half of Turkey’s imports and bought half of Turkey’s exports, notably chromite, vital for steel production. But Atatürk, Mr. Ihrig writes, hedged his bets and dodged a “decisive friendship.” After Atatürk’s death in 1938, his successor, İsmet İnönü, tacked between the powers. In 1939, Turkey signed a treaty of mutual defense with Britain, but in 1941 Turkey agreed to a Treaty of Friendship with Germany, securing Hitler’s southern flank before he invaded Russia. İnönü hinted that Turkey would join the fight if Germany could conquer the Caucasus.

As David Motadel writes in “Islam and Nazi Germany’s War,” Muslims fought on both sides in World War II. But only Nazis and Islamists had a political-spiritual romance. Both groups hated Jews, Bolsheviks and liberal democracy. Both sought what Michel Foucault, praising the Iranian Revolution in 1979, would later call the spiritual-political “transfiguration of the world” by “combat.” The caliph, the Islamist Zaki Ali explained, was the “führer of the believers.” “Made by Jews, led by Jews—therewith Bolshevism is the natural enemy of Islam,” wrote Mahomed

Sabry, a Berlin-based propagandist for the Muslim Brotherhood in “Islam, Judaism, Bolshevism,” a book that the Reich’s propaganda ministry recommended to journalists.

By late 1941, Germany controlled large Muslim populations in southeastern Europe and North Africa. Nazi policy extended the grand schemes of imperial Germany toward madly modern ends. To aid the “liberation struggle of Islam,” the propaganda ministry told journalists to praise “the Islamic world as a cultural factor,” avoid criticism of Islam, and substitute “anti-Jewish” for “anti-Semitic.” In April 1942, Hitler became the first European leader to declare that Islam was “incapable of terrorism.” As usual, it is hard to tell if the Führer set the tone or merely amplified his people’s obsessions.

Like Atatürk, Hitler saw the Turkish renaissance as racial, not religious. Germans of Turkish and Iranian descent were exempt from the Nuremberg Laws, but the racial status of German Arabs remained creatively indefinite, even after September 1943, when Muslims became eligible for membership in the Nazi Party. As the war went on, Balkan Muslims were added to the “racially valuable peoples of Europe.” The Palestinian Arab leader Haj Amin al-Husseini, Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, recruited thousands of these “Musligermanics” as the first non-Germanic volunteers for the SS. Soviet prisoners of Turkic origin volunteered too. In November 1944, Himmler and the Mufti created an SS-run school for military imams at Dresden.

Haj Amin al-Husseini, the founder of Palestinian nationalism, is notorious for his efforts to persuade the Nazis to extend their genocide of the Jews to the Palestine Mandate. The Mufti met Hitler and Himmler in Berlin in 1941 and asked the Nazis to guarantee that when the Wehrmacht drove the British from Palestine, Germany would establish an Arab regime and assist in the “removal” of its Jews. Hitler replied that the Reich would not intervene in the Mufti’s kingdom, other than to pursue their shared goal: “the annihilation of Jewry living in Arab space.” The Mufti settled in Berlin, befriended Adolf Eichmann, and lobbied the governments of Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria to cancel a plan to transfer Jews to Palestine. Subsequently, some 400,000 Jews from these countries were sent to death camps.

Mr. Motadel describes the Mufti’s Nazi dealings vividly, but he also excels in unearthing other odious and fascinating characters. Among them: Zeki Kiram, the Ottoman officer turned disciple of Rashid Rida, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood; and Johann von Leers, a Nazi professor who converted to Islam and became Omar Amin, an anti-Semitic publicist for Nasser’s Egypt.

Some of the Muslim Nazis ended badly. Others stayed at their desks, then consulted for Saudi Arabia in retirement. The major Muslim collaborators escaped. Fearing Muslim uprisings, the Allies did not try the Mufti as a war criminal; he died in Beirut in 1974, politically eclipsed by his young cousin, Mohammed Abdul Raouf al-Qudwa al-Husseini, better known as Yasser Arafat. Meanwhile, at Munich, the surviving SS volunteers, joined by refugees from the Soviet Union, formed postwar Germany’s first Islamic community, its leaders an ex-Wehrmacht imam and the erstwhile chief imam of the Eastern Muslim SS Division. In the 1950s, some of Munich’s Muslim ex-Nazis worked for the intelligence services of the U.S., tightening the “green belt against Communism.”

A revolutionary idea must be seeded before, in Heidegger 's words, "suddenly the unbound powers of being come forth and are accomplished as history." Seven decades passed between Europe's revolutionary spring of 1848 and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The effects of Germany's ideological seeding of Muslim societies in the 1930s and '40s are only now becoming apparent.

Impeccably researched and clearly written, Messrs. Motadel and Ihrig's books will transform our understanding of the Nazi policies that were, Mr. Motadel writes, some "of the most vigorous attempts to politicize and instrumentalize Islam in modern history."

—Mr. Green is the author of "The Double Life of Dr. Lopez" and "Three Empires on the Nile."

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