



2015-079

David Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. 500. ISBN 978-0-674-72460-0.

Review by Cathal J. Nolan, Boston University (cnolan@bu.edu).

This ambitious, well researched study explores under-publicized German efforts to “promote an alliance with the Muslim world against their alleged common enemies, most notably the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Jews” (1). David Motadel (Univ. of Cambridge) has gathered a trove of engaging materials from over thirty archives in fourteen countries; his footnotes occupy nearly a third of his book. It is an important story well told. Yet, something is missing.

Despite the conjunction in its title, this is rather a history of Islam *in* Nazi Germany’s wartime thinking and propaganda. Motadel is not especially concerned with how various groups of Muslims welcomed, resisted, or just ignored Germany’s efforts to engage them against the Allied powers, both western and Soviet. There is little here about Muslim views of Nazism, beyond those expressed by a few disaffected intellectuals and prominent collaborators who made the trip to see the Führer. This is, rather, a tale of Islam’s place in the worldview of leading Nazi “thinkers” and commanders in the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS.

Motadel establishes that Muslims became relevant to Berlin only in 1941-42, in direct response to the Reich’s shifting battlefield fortunes in the Middle East, the Balkans, and especially on the Eastern Front. The end of easy victories during deep territorial penetrations by German armies made several Muslim-populated regions key arenas of operations within a wider strategic world war. For a brief period in late 1942, these new war zones seemed poised to become decisive theaters in the war. Motadel is less concerned with the Muslim response to Nazi outreach than in the reconceptualization of Islam by top Nazi leaders eager to solve their short-term military manpower problems and incipient political crises in Germany.

The author demonstrates that this change in German thinking did not reflect long-range military or strategic planning, but only the “pragmatic” near-term exigencies of total mobilization (2-3, 219-44). The Nazi leadership—including Heinrich Himmler and Hitler himself—pivoted from prewar indifference (not hostility) to Islam, to overt courtship of the Muslim world, conceived as a monolith defined by religion rather than race or geography. The new policy position was manifested in high-level meetings with Muslim collaborators (most famously, the Grand Mufti); the building of mosques in POW camps and in German-occupied territories; (mostly futile) efforts to foment Muslim rebellions in Allied-controlled colonies and rear areas; and, most significantly, the recruitment of tens of thousands of Muslims into the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS. Motadel’s discussion of these matters makes an important contribution to the wider story of the attempts by the major belligerents, including Italy and Japan, to appeal to Muslims as the war went on amid appalling and unsustainable rates of attrition.

The book comprises three parts. The first, “Foundations,” documents strategic and ideological debates about the potential place of Islam in the National Socialist New Order and in the German military. Motadel traces German attitudes about Islam from the late nineteenth century, highlighting Imperial Germany’s effort during World War I to provoke and promote jihadist revolts among populations subject to Allied rule. Starting in 1941, he contends, wartime Germany’s military needs made an alliance with Muslims against the Allies an attractive prospect, made palatable in part by Hitler’s own longtime (if shallow and ill-informed) admiration of Islam as a “warrior religion.” Motadel confirms that Hitler’s inattention to Muslim lands while his armies were winning battles was transformed into active interest as the fortunes of war turned against him.

Readers interested principally in military history may find this section of the book unrewarding. But it provides an essential discussion of prewar and early war memoranda and internal policy papers that foreshadowed the ideological and pragmatic embrace of Muslims as possible military and strategic assets:

“Germany’s involvement with Islam ... had not been planned. It developed over the course of the war and gradually involved more and more war zones and parts of the regime” (54). The ultimately deluded interest in a Nazi-Islamic alliance was made possible in part by the uniform absence of anti-Islamic attitudes among leading Nazis, up to and including Himmler and Hitler.

Part II, “Muslims in the War Zones,” concerns German policies and propaganda in Muslim areas occupied (or thought likely to be) by 1941. It also describes Wehrmacht policies regarding Muslim prisoners and Muslim populations still behind Soviet or British lines. Propaganda aimed at these groups depicted Nazi Germany as the true defender of Islam. Accordingly, German soldiers were instructed to respect local religious practices ranging from daily prayers to fasting and dietary restrictions. From the Caucasus to North Africa, German commanders permitted Muslim holiday observances and religious endowments (*waqf*) and built or repaired mosques and madrasas with the aim of undermining Allied rule.

This effort was especially important and extensive in Soviet areas, where more Germans engaged more Muslims over a longer time without the intermediation of governing colonial powers like, for example, Italy in North Africa. Motadel’s main topic here is propaganda, from leaflets (wasted on largely illiterate populations in the Middle East) to shortwave radio broadcasts (also ineffective, as most Arabs lacked receivers), and direct recruitment, initially by the Wehrmacht and later the Waffen SS. While the research and documentation here are impressive, the author spends far too much time on this fruitless propaganda campaign.

Part III, “Muslims in the Army,” will be of particular interest to readers of military history. Having laid the ideological groundwork and painfully cognizant of soaring military casualties, Nazi leaders authorized recruiters to bring tens of thousands of Muslims from the Balkans, North Africa, and the Soviet Union into the war in German uniforms. Though he discusses mobilization of Muslims from all the German-occupied territories, Motadel frustratingly gives no clear indication of overall numbers of recruits. Despite the mandated accommodation of Muslim religious practices, Nazi race-war (*Rassenkampf*) theory and practices complicated matters: for instance, while Roma converts to Islam were victims of mass killings, other Muslim Roma were recruited into auxiliary “Tatar” units. The façade of tolerance of and respect for Islam was replaced by lethal hostility toward Crimean Tatars as the Wehrmacht retreated from the East.

This pattern of political considerations yielding to realities of wartime need recurred in the Balkans, where the SS enthusiastically recruited Bosnian and Albanian Muslims despite the objections of Germany’s vicious fascist ally, the Croatian Ustaša, and local Italian authorities. As the manpower needs of the SS trumped anti-Islamic hostility, many other Muslims were given German uniforms and weapons: Crimean, Turkestani, Volga Tatar, Chechen, and Caucasian SS units were formed on the Eastern Front, joining those from Albania and Bosnia. By 1943, there were dozens of Muslim battalions within the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS. Three of these fought at Stalingrad; others defended Berlin in the last days of the Third Reich; still others served in France and Italy and across the Caucasus and Balkans. Many thousands of Muslims died fighting for Hitler and Nazism. Or did they? Motadel says almost nothing about the motivations of these volunteers, beyond shallow suppositions about “material interests” and men’s hope “to protect their families and villages.” He writes that “ideology and political motivations also played a role” (221–22), but gives no particulars. Then it’s back to German ideas, German plans, German documents.

By January 1944, the Nazis’ need for troops was so urgent that Himmler ramped up the recruitment of Muslims, especially in the USSR, into the Waffen SS—“one of the greatest mobilization campaigns of Muslims led by a non-Muslim power in history” (219). Motadel mentions only in passing the much larger numbers of Muslims who fought within Allied armies during the war. Free French units drew on manpower reserves (over 233,000 men) from West and North Africa; these men fought across North Africa and then into southern Europe and Germany itself. The Red Army recruited many troops from the Soviet Union’s twenty million Muslims. British units in Palestine, Transjordan, Libya, and Egypt included Muslim soldiers, who also constituted the largest religious contingent in the two-million-man Indian Army. But even in a section of the book ostensibly devoted to military mobilization, the closing chapters, “Islam and Politics in the Units” and “Islam and Military Propaganda,” revert yet again to the author’s central interest—how Germans conceptualized and instrumentalized their turn toward Islam.

*Islam and Nazi Germany's War* is a fine work of scholarship that clarifies the role of the people of Islamic territories in various theaters of World War II. For this reason alone, it should be read by anyone seeking a discerning treatment of the topic. But, while David Motadel has cogently explained how all the major belligerents, Nazi Germany included, sought to bend Islam to their own strategic needs and vision, he leaves his reader to wonder how the Muslim populations themselves responded to those efforts. Were they zealous, indifferent, or merely bewildered by the tsunami of war and death devastating their troubled lands and lives? These questions remain unanswered.