



Muslims in interwar Europe: more than just passive strangers

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In cooperation with the Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (LUCIS), the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) research group Europe from the Outside, part of the Institute for Oriental and Asian Studies at the University of Bonn, organized an international symposium entitled "Islam in Interwar Europe and

European Transcultural History" on Dec. 13-14, 2012. The conference took place at Leiden University, and was organized by Dr. Bekim Agai (head of Europe from the Outside), Mehdi Sajid (Ph.D. fellow of the research group) and Dr. Umar Ryad (assistant professor, Leiden University).

The background for the conference was the observation that the Muslim presence in Europe during the interwar and

World War II period has been mostly dealt with as an extended part of Middle Eastern anti-colonial history, or briefly as related to Western European migration history. Such existing histories tend to overlook the impact of the Muslim populations in the continent on the socio-political context of Europe itself.

By focusing on the local and international shape of Muslim political and social involvement

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in interwar Europe, the symposium aimed at combining the interaction between variegated Western and Eastern figures; namely, political agitators, ideologues, colonial administrators, diplomats, Orientalists, European anti-colonial socialists and communists, Arab and Muslim nationalist students in Europe, European converts to Islam, and reformist thinkers in the Muslim world.

The conference was divided into five sections: Section one, "In Search for a place for Islam in the European Space," engaged with the question of how manifestations of a "European" Islam (as compared to its salient forms in the Middle Eastern for instance) might have looked in the interwar period. Naomi Davidson (University of Ottawa) reflected on the role of the French State and "official" Muslim interlocutors in transforming the Islamic religious identity of North Africans into an exclusivist and racialized one. Umar Ryad (Leiden University) compared the conversion stories of two Dutch men, the military officer Mohammed Ali van Beetem (d. 1938) and the physician Mohammed Abdul Ali van der Hoog (d. 1957). Marc Baer (UC Irvine) carried the question of fusing and reconciling an Islamic identity with a European one even further by focusing on the case of German Jewish convert to Islam Hugo Marcus (1880-1966). The papers of the first session showed, on the one hand, the programmatic attempt on the state level to identify the Islamic faith as a religion of

specific non-European groups (mostly from the colonies) and to create state policy directed to the religious part of their identity. While on the other hand, they also discussed some manifestations of a "European Islam," i.e. the challenges posed by the conversion of indigenous Europeans to both the perceptions of their own societies and the politics of their states.

Session two, "Muslim-Christian Encounters and Religious Missions," dealt with the role of religious identities in shaping the notion of the content of "Islamness," "Christianness" and "Europeanness" in the trans-

LOOKING AT MUSLIMS IN INTERWAR EUROPE AS 'EUROPEAN ACTORS' COULD CHALLENGE OUR NOTION OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

regional context during the interwar period. Gerdien Jonker (Erlangen Centre for Islam and Law in Europe) dealt with the Ahmadiyya mission in interwar Berlin, one of the most striking examples of modern Muslim missions in the West. Mehdi Sajid (University of Bonn) analyzed the participation of the Arab-Muslim activist Shakh Arslan (1869-1946) in the ongoing polemics against Christian missionary activities in the Middle East from his Swiss exile in the 1920s and 1930s. The Muslim actors within Europe broadened the scope of the

various discussions taking place in their home countries by their reception of Western ideas within Europe. This very transfer and transformation of intellectual concepts across territorial, intellectual and cultural boundaries underlines the shared history and the intertwined relation of Europe and the Middle East in that era. Ali al-Tuma (Leiden University) focused on the participation of Moroccan soldiers in the Spanish Civil War. This session continued the discussion started in the first one, focusing on further aspects that shaped the very notions of Islamness and Europeanness, like the impact of religious missions on European identity, the role played by the Muslim diaspora as an intersection between Europe and the Islamic world, and the place of Muslims in the European military history and politics directed at their religious identity.

Section three, "Ceasing Being Guests: Muslims' Contributions in the European Context," focused on both the "unique" situation of the autochthonous Muslim populations in Central and Eastern Europe as an unquestionable component of their respective nations and the contribution of Muslims to the artistic scene in the Western Europe. Egdas Rausas (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania) discussed the status of the local Muslim community in interwar Lithuania, which has a long history within the country. This shows that a study of Islam in Europe in interwar Europe did not only take place in Western Europe. Agata Nalborczyk (University of Warsaw) followed

up a similar idea by arguing that the Polish-Lithuanian Tatar Muslims were by no means considered as outsiders in their setting. Yuka Kadoi (University of Edinburgh) examined Muslim contributions to art, art dealing, exhibitions and scholarship, and therefore their Muslim participation in the representation of Islam in Europe. It showed that Muslims in interwar Europe played a role in the (re)creation of the image of their own art traditions in Europe, which is of special interest for the debate of Orientalism. The session reconsidered the interactions and inter-crossings between European and Muslim cultures by confirming that Muslim religious, political and artistic ideals were integral part of Western modernity and history.

Session Four, "Revisiting the Aprioris Challenging the Perceptions of the Self and the Other," investigated the socio-political and intellectual debates regarding the conceptualization of Islam and its image formations among Muslims in interwar Europe. As for the intellectual debates of the conceptualization of Islam, Armina Omerika (University of Bochum) took former Yugoslavia as an illustrative example of the way European Muslims dealt with the socio-cultural changes and intellectual challenges of the interwar period. Zaur Gasimov (Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz/Germany) dealt with the "connectivity" among Caucasian Muslims in the European metropolises and how this has influenced the debates on Islam in their respective

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countries. The second part of this session analyzed the extent of the potential interrelations of Muslim self-images and European local conditions. Klaas Stutje (University of Amsterdam) continued the discussion by focusing on the socio-political debates and the Islamic life of Indonesian Muslims in interwar Holland -- mainly Indonesian students who played a pivotal role in the Indonesian nationalist struggle for independence as well as in the early postcolonial state formation. Said Hassan (Al-Azhar University in Cairo) brought attention to another group of students, namely Arab students, who tried to provide an authentic picture from Europe and European ideas and culture from "within." This part of the final session argued that as outside observers from within, Indonesian and Arab students participated in the popularization of the European political, socio-religious and intellectual thought in the Muslim mind. They pushed the discussions beyond the question of anti-colonial nationalism to include the Muslim imaginations of the

racess, civilization and religion in the West from within.

In the concluding session, the organizers argued that the approach of looking at Muslims in interwar Europe as "European actors" could challenge our notion of European history. Muslims in Europe do not belong to "other histories" (like Middle Eastern or Asian history). The organizers argued that the history of Europe is incomplete if we do not take the roles of Muslims into European social history into account.

The conference was a prelude to a collective project that could generate "frontier knowledge" in the historical study of Muslim prior to the migration integration experience in Europe. The "connectivity" of Muslim actors and networks in the (Central) European metropolis constituted the nodes of their mobile networks. The conference's theme demonstrated the global character and the role of "shared" spaces in which those political, religious and intellectual movements/networks developed and functioned. It primarily highlighted the multiple layers of their political identification and action that often combined religious orientations, political ambitions and social status. In that sense it made an argument that we should not deal with Muslims in interwar Europe as simply visitors or colonial victims, but treat them as engaged actors in the European and international space. An edited volume on the basis of the papers of the conference is planned. 

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