



German Oriental Studies

The Middle East and Islam from 1800 to 1945

Ursula Wokoeck's book is a dissertation written at the School of History, Tel Aviv University. Known by her articles on Ibn Khaldun, Theodor Noeldeke, and Middle Eastern modernity, this historian researched the development of Middle Eastern studies as part of a wider discipline: **Oriental** studies, then still a minor discipline at the faculty of philosophy within the modern German university system.

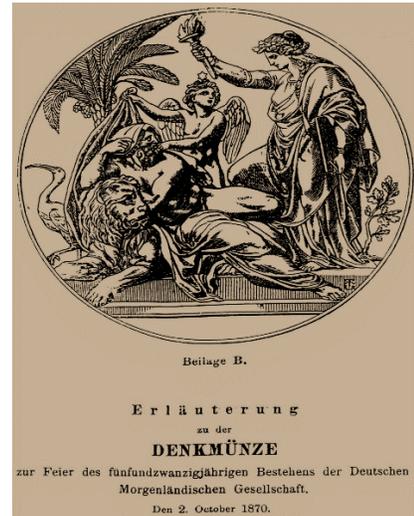
After the introduction, she shows in eight chapters how the modern German universities regarded the Middle East and treated modern Oriental studies. Wokoeck investigated the differentiations in Sanskrit and Semitic languages and the emergence of Assyriologie and Islamic studies. She offers insights into political factors in the Third Reich and draws basic conclusions. The overviews with the names of scholars at universities are most valuable.

25 Years of German Oriental Society in **1870**:

Anniversary Coin, her on the right:

Unity of Orient and Occident

The author illuminates how the new discipline of Oriental studies and the institutional separation between faculties of theology and philosophy emerged. In her conclusions, she points out the supporting role of the German Oriental Society—the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft—toward the scholars since **1845**. In addition to this self-organized support, the German Empire developed a growing practical need to equip its diplomats with basic skills in foreign languages since the 1871 German Reich.



Indeed, the Germans followed either French or **British** examples on Oriental, less so **Orientalist** studies. The striking difference were **Berlin's** non-imperial **policy**, no colonies in the Middle East, and shortly after **1900** about 21 universities with 57 “associate professors” (docents, readers) for Oriental studies and two **specialized** institutes that were not related to universities.

Nevertheless, the rise of Islamic studies was closely connected to German colonial possessions in East and West Africa. Wokoeck mentions the gradual attempt to introduce the study of the modern Middle East as an academic field in German universities. Martin **Hartmann**, a renown Arabist at the turn of the Century, led this effort which remained, according to the author, a minor trend due to limited travel opportunities for Germans in the Middle East after World War One until 1926.

The Kaiser in Jerusalem: in 1898 he started his “official Islam policy”. Ten years later he labeled it “my 20 decades of Turkish policy”

But some progress toward modern Middle Eastern studies was achieved in research institutions that did not belong to universities as in Berlin the 1887 Seminar of Oriental Languages, the 1912 Oriental Commission and in Hamburg the 1908 Colonial Institute.



Carl Heinrich Becker, Hugo Grothe, Eugen Mittwoch, and Max von Oppenheim—the latter was not an Orientalist as a trained scholar teaching or researching the Orient but a diplomat posted in Cairo from 1896 to 1909—drove this process ahead. Although most scholars were not directly involved in colonial administration, a need grew to train civil servants working in zones under German control in Africa West and East with Muslim populations. Thus, the Colonial Institute of Hamburg was founded in 1908. Carl Heinrich Becker, the father of modern Islamic studies in Germany (like Bernard Lewis two decades later in Great Britain), held there the first chair of Oriental history and culture.

In that same year, Becker started to lecture on main issues facing the current modern Middle Eastern policy. All this came ten years after the Kaiser began an “official policy on Islam” by his visit to the Ottoman caliph. Three trends converged: Berlin’s needs of a new world policy, Islam as a rising global power, and the expansion of modern German research facilities. However, all involved were plunged into the First World War and lost their innocence. This included traditional academics of universities, who supported the concerted German-Ottoman jihadization of Islamism from 1914 to 1918.

In Berlin, the Oriental trend involved many institutions, clubs, and societies like the German Orient Institute of 1918 [the successor of von Oppenheim’s News Organization for the Orient], the Orient Club in 1920 or the Islam Institute in 1927.

Ursula Wokeock’s conclusion that Middle Eastern studies, narrowly defined as Arabic and Islamic studies, were not properly established in the first half of the 20th century, is disputable. On the one hand, there appeared a great continuity in the study of the Middle East and Islam from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich—and thereafter.

On the other hand, some Muslims, who served Berlin during the First World War, remained in Germany and connected with German scholars. Other important groups of Muslim immigrants arrived in the big wave of 1920, reinforcing the earlier trend of joint research between them and German academics.

These groups of Muslims joined German scholars also in establishing their institutes and societies or enlarging them. This led in Berlin to the reconstitution of the Islamic Central Institute in 1939. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Amin al-Husaini managed to establish his Berlin based “Jewish Institute” modeled according to the “Institute for the Research of The Jewish Question” in Frankfurt/Main. There, in April 1943, the Nazis’ chief ideologue and Reich Minister for Occupied Eastern Territories (the Baltics, Belarus, Ukraine, Caucasus), Alfred E. Rosenberg invited him who admired this “great philosopher’s” theories and spent there three days studying.

The Nazis supported a wide range of Islamic and “Jewish” studies, not to forget the training courses for imams and mullahs in the army and the SS troops. At the same time, academics drove their Jewish colleagues out and many of them perished in the ever-growing system of death camps. Not many succeeded to escape to the free lands or to Mandatory Palestine.

Wokoeck is generally right in her conclusions, however some points need to be clarified. Firstly, the assumption that most scholars in Middle Eastern studies, who stayed and worked in Germany, kept their distance from the regime was wrong (even today we find scholars discussing this and not mentioning the Nazi party’s membership of their subjects).

Furthermore, most academics became Nazis: cooperation was the rule rather than the exception. Contrary to the author’s claim, the Nazis did not seem to have any long-term plans to conquer some Middle Eastern lands. They followed first chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s tradition of not having colonies but regional rulers to do the job on their own in a pyramid of global power sharing. The Nazis regarded the Middle East “only” as a battle-ground if other European rivals like the British stayed there but not as an area to build settlements for “Aryans.”

Secondly, the author maintains that many of the very same scholars who were engaged in the period of Nazi Germany continued to be employed at academic institutions working on the Middle East after 1945.

This means that modern Middle Eastern studies in Germany had a heavy Nazi heritage, which needs to be recognized and investigated, including what impact that legacy actually had on the German academia in the era that followed World War Two. Usually, it was assumed that scholars did define research matters on their own. But for many years they avoided related topics in a “generational turn away.” There grew deep gaps that are still to be seen in the global era not least for some dominating British and French narratives in Middle Eastern studies.

The author claimed that the establishment of Middle Eastern studies and its major stages were determined by factors outside the discipline. I add that Muslims living in Germany since 1900 also had an impact on the unfolding of those studies. The networks between them living in Germany throughout the earlier part of the 20th Century and the German scholars of that same time are a missing dimension—since 2014 more investigated—in the research of this topic.

However, Ursula Wokoeck’s solid study opens the door to further research on German Orientalism and Middle Eastern Studies for this crucial time in world history. Historically grounded, well balanced and highly insightful, this analysis is a significant contribution to a long-lasting discussion, which since the millennium has become a subject of great international interest.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

Ursula Wokoeck: German Orientalism: The Study of the Middle East and Islam from 1800 to 1945. London, New York, Routledge, 2009, 333 pp.

This review appeared first in [Insight Turkey](#) [October 1, 2010]. It was updated, and some links were added.