

Hitler, the Arabs and the Jews

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While some Arabs supported the Nazi regime for a variety of reasons, others sided with the Allies and rose up against anti-Semitism. Gilbert Achcar's timely book brings new depth to a historiographic field that is still prone to caricatures.

Reviewed:

- Gilbert Achcar, *Les Arabes et la Shoah*, Paris, Sindbad, 2009, 525 p., 26 €.
- Matthias Küntzel, *Jihad et haine des Juifs*, Paris, L'œuvre éditions, 2009, 238 p., 20 €
- Martin Cüppers and Klaus-Michaël Mallmann, Paris, *Croissant fertile et Croix gammée*, Éditions Verdier, 2009, 352p., 50 €.

Over the last few years, historical books concerning Arab acknowledgement of the Shoah and, more generally, relations between the Arab-Muslim world and Nazi Germany have increased in number and caused a controversy. Within that context, Gilbert Achcar's work *Les Arabes et la Shoah* (The Arabs and the Shoah), published in October 2009, stands out for its widely varied bibliography and sources, keen conceptualisation, high scientific quality and, most of all, its constant desire to maintain axiological neutrality. Such methodological exactitude – a priority for any work making scientific claims – deserves to be highlighted, since other books dealing with this subject have an unwelcome tendency to avoid it or indeed cast it aside altogether.

To illustrate this sad state of affairs, we could cite *Halbmond und Hakenkreuz* (Crescent Moon and Swastika – English translation not yet published) by Martin Cüppers and Klaus Michaël Mallmann, and *Jihad and Jew-Hatred* by Matthias Küntzel. Both of these books were published in France at the same time as Achcar's work. The first book, originally published in German in 2006, presents the Arab-Muslim world as uniform, monolithic,

unanimously anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist and pro-Nazi. Dominique Trimbur¹ correctly observes a “real intellectual and scientific dishonesty on the part of the authors. In fact, what is described is not a policy, or relations between Nazi Germany and the Arab-Muslim world, but rather a series of misrepresentations set out end to end, meant to serve as a full picture”. He is right to add that “the overly exclusive use of one single archive source – that is, the Nazi archives – is by no means able to portray the complete, consistent, balanced or representative picture to which the authors supposedly aspire”.

The second, *Jihad and Jew-Hatred*, is in the same vein. The author’s highly selective use of sources and recourse to dubious statements leave the reader feeling perplexed. In addition, the author makes value judgments that have no place in a history book: claiming that an “orthodox Muslim” is by nature “hostile to science” shows complete ignorance of Muslim culture. Even more shocking is the mockery of Muslim rituals and beliefs: “Islamists believe that lowering the head down to the dust on the ground is a sign of spirituality” (Küntzel is referring to prayer, which is not an *Islamist* but rather an *Islamic* practice and constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam); also, “the Koran gives even the poorest believer the consolation that he can dominate women, and permission to take part in religious purges” (p. 146). How can one fail to perceive in this statement an Islamophobic sentiment or bitter hostility towards Islam and its representations?

The worrying aspect is that the book written by Cüppers and Mallmann came out of an official German institution, the Ludwigsburg, responsible for bringing war criminals to justice and supposedly producing reference works; and that Küntzel’s book has been translated into a dozen languages and received the prestigious Independent Publisher Book Award in the United States.

What is at stake?

The issue that lies at the heart of the historical debate stirred up by these publications consists in determining the extent to which Arabs and Muslims – particularly Palestinians – were responsible for implementing the Shoah. As might be expected, the authors of the aforementioned works carry out the classic process of essentialising the Muslim world, establishing an overwhelming and unsubtle indictment of that responsibility, which may be

¹ Dominique Trimbur is associate researcher at the French Research Centre of Jerusalem. The passages quoted are taken from a critical review (in French) published in the Auschwitz Foundation’s review.

summarised as follows: the anti-Semitic atavism of Muslims has predisposed them to unanimously become the instruments of Jewish destruction.

It comes as no surprise to find that those who support this kind of essentialising interpretation of history borrow from the figure of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Mohammed Amin al-Husayni, in order to back up their theory. The collaboration between the Third Reich and the Mufti who, incidentally, never tried to hide his fascination for Nazism in his memoirs, is a proven fact that is no longer contested. Nevertheless, the reasons cited as justification for this alliance are not so clear. Henry Laurens sees it as “political opportunism for the most part, even if he was certainly highly sensitive to the Nazi leaders’ attentiveness towards him²”. Gilbert Achcar, for his part, who often attributes relations between the Third Reich and Arab nationalists to a tactical alliance, faithful to the proverb “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, does not even allow it these “mitigating circumstances”: he is convinced that the Mufti collaborated with the Nazis because of ideological affinities.

The Mufti and the Third Reich

The portrait that Achcar paints of the Mufti is that of an “egocentric megalomaniac” (p. 231) accused of having exploited the religious authority that his position as Mufti conferred upon him in order to defend a “pseudo-identity of views common to both Nazism and the Islamic religion” with regard to the Jewish question (p. 249) and of having actively supported the national socialist regime – particularly by contributing personally to the training and supervision of the Bosnian SS Handschar and Kama divisions, created in 1943 (which, in fact, were used more to fight against the Serbs than against the Jews). Achcar also recalls that al-Husayni endeavoured to spread anti-Jewish rhetoric in the Muslim world: he mentions some of his many scathing attacks, which advocated death for the Jews, based on the selective use of the Islamic corpus and on anti-Semitic European literature.

No need, then, to dwell on the Mufti’s responsibility: he was guilty of having lapsed into simplistic anti-Semitism and was unanimously pilloried as a “collaborating activist”. On the other hand, one may well challenge the process of metonymy used by the “essentialists”, which consisted in using a part to refer to the whole – that is, the Mufti for the Arab-Muslim world. This simplistic shortcut concludes that the Arab-Muslim world was guilty of

² H. Laurens, « La Haine de l’autre », *L’Orient le jour*, 3 December 2009.

collaborating with the Nazis and wanting to kill Jews because the Mufti had done so. It is surprising that a philosopher and historian such as Pierre-André Taguieff and his usually better-constructed syllogisms, should have given into that temptation. Indeed, in the preface he devotes to Küntzel's work, Taguieff states, bringing to an end three pages in which he describes relations between al-Husayni and the Nazis, that "one of the major consequences of the political alliance between Nazism and the Arab-Muslim world was 'the convergence of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the Nazi regime' during the Second World War" (Taguieff, in Küntzel's preface, p. 23), thereby reducing the Arab-Muslim world, in its relations with Nazism, to the figure of the Mufti. That assertion conceals a far more serious accusation. Any informed reader, wondering how that supposed "convergence of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the Nazi regime" was put into action, would have trouble seeing beyond the Nazis' adoption of the 'final solution': before taking any steps towards extermination, the Nazis were not opposed to Zionism, which they considered as a means of getting rid of "their" Jews by sending them to Palestine³. In short, the Mufti – and therefore, if we are to adhere to Taguieff's previous simplification, the Arab-Muslim world – would have played a significant role in the Nazis' adoption of the 'final solution'. As research currently stands, that assertion is unlikely to be true, given that there is no empirical evidence allowing it to be established as historical fact. In his memoirs, al-Husayni states that he was made aware of the 'final solution' during a conversation with Himmler in the summer of 1943⁴ – which did nothing, however, to change his collaborationist political line. We should note that, in his writings after the Second World War, he never denied the Jewish genocide or the number of its victims, which gives some credibility to his words. He contented himself with stating that it was not "his problem" – thereby clearly illustrating the moral mediocrity of his character. Nevertheless, although he became an accomplice to the extermination project, we cannot empirically prove that he instigated it. On this point we should also note that the works of Saul Friedländer, a great Shoah specialist⁵, make no mention of this hypothesis.

Let us now move on from the case of the Mufti, on which far too much ink has been spilled, to explore the work in question. Gilbert Achcar, who goes against the 'essentialist' tendency, gives a more contrasting and intellectually honest overview. He distinguishes four

³ Nazi Germany also signed a transfer agreement with the Zionist movement: The Haavara Agreement, 25th August 1933.

⁴ Amin al-Husayni, *Mudhakkirat al-Hajj Amin*, cited by Henry Laurens, *La Palestine*, Fayard, vol. 2, p. 469.

⁵ See the interview with S. Friedlander at *La Vie des idées*:

http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Langue-des-bourreaux-langue-des.html?decoupe_recherche=friedlander

major lines of thinking in the Middle East at the time of the Second World War, each of which collaborated with national-socialism and/or accepted it to varying degrees: ‘reactionary Pan-Islamism’, ‘nationalism’, ‘liberal Occidentalism’, and ‘Marxism’.

Reactionary Pan-Islamism, Nationalism and collaboration

Achcar shows that the ‘fundamentalist Pan-Islamic’ trend, to which the Mufti belonged, proved to be the most complacent about Nazism despite the ideological incompatibilities that were inherent in its Neo-pagan core – the cult of Hitler, raised to the rank of a demigod, was indeed hard to reconcile with the Islamic principle of divine uniqueness. Inclined to see the world as being driven by the religious prism of the first centuries of Islam, the reactionary Pan-Islamists quickly understood the Palestinian conflict in terms of a religious war pitting Muslims – and their allies – against Jews.

Achcar explains that Arab nationalists showed varying degrees of sympathy for Nazi Germany, which was perceived as an enemy of Great Britain, particularly in countries under British rule – Egypt, Iraq, and especially Palestine, where the less sophisticated view was that anti-Semitism was a defence against Zionism.

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party, founded by Antun Saadeh, a Germanophile and Hitler admirer, certainly came closest to the Nazi model: the party flag was directly copied from the Nazi flag, with the red and black colours inverted and a four-blade helix instead of the swastika. Achcar states that Saadeh’s reactionary conscience reached levels of totalitarianism that were unequalled in the Middle East (p. 128-129). However, despite his excessive zeal, he did not manage to awaken any interest among the Arab masses or the German authorities, which rejected his requests for support, and this led him to later deny any affinity with Nazism.

In Egypt, Achcar shows that the *Misr al-Fatât* (Young Egypt) organisation, inspired by the rising tide of European fascism, was barely taken seriously by the Nazi regime with which it maintained a rocky relationship – which did not stop it from lapsing into anti-Semitism, both in words and actions⁶.

⁶ Young Egypt was responsible for the 1939 anti-Jewish campaign of unrest, which called for the “boycotting of Jewish business”

The attitude of the Iraqi ultranationalists, who initially likened Nazism to a form of colonialism, took a pro-Nazi turn in the spring of 1941, after the British army overthrew the putschist Rashid Ali al-Gaylani. The *Farhūd* pogrom of June 1941, supported by the fallen putschists who were determined to turn the Jews into scapegoats for their frustration, was a sad illustration of that. However, Achcar specifies that during that incident the anti-Jewish violence – perpetrated by a small minority – was condemned by the general population and that the rioters were rapidly dispersed by shots fired by the Iraqi army. The author reminds us that such cases were marginal: most of the Arab nationalists who grew close to Berlin did so less out of ideological complicity with Nazism than out of hatred for the British colonisers and a desire to free the Arab nation from their yoke.

Although the collaboration between Nazi Germany and these fundamentalist or nationalist Pan-Islamist groups is a proven fact, it fell well short of finding general approval. Achcar explains that the majority of liberal pro-independence individuals, ‘progressive’ nationalists, and Marxists rejected Nazism as a negation of their values. They saw Hitler as “humanity’s greatest enemy” (p.81) and considered Great Britain to be the lesser of two evils.

Western pro-independence groups, Marxists and the rejection of Nazism

Instilled with the ‘modernist’ system of cultural values that had resulted from the Enlightenment, the ‘liberal Occidentals’, from the very beginning, countered Nazism with humanism, and Zionism with anti-colonialism. They strongly condemned anti-Semitism as a “backward and primitive way of thinking which consists in persecuting, in the name of race, the various elements that make up the nation as a whole⁷”. Until the end of the Second World War, they represented the dominant way of thinking, including in Palestine – despite the success encountered by the radical wing of the national movement led by Amin al-Husayni. That was the voice that held sway in the conference on the Palestine question, held on 7th October 1944 in Alexandria and presided over by government leaders from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, as shown by the special resolution pronounced at the end of the talks: “nobody regrets more than [the committee] the tragedy that has been inflicted on the Jews of Europe by the European dictatorial States. However, the issue of these Jews should not be confused with Zionism, since there is no greater injustice than to resolve the problems

⁷ Joseph Achcar, quoted by Gilbert Achcar, p. 67. Joseph Achcar, Gilbert Achcar’s father, was a supporter of the ‘liberal Occidental’ movement.

of the Jews of Europe by means of another injustice; that is, by inflicting an injustice on the Arabs of Palestine” (p. 83).

As far as the Marxist Arabs were concerned, Achcar explains that they adopted the same attitude, rejecting both Zionism and Nazism, which they considered to be “two sides of the same coin”, not favouring either (p. 89). Engaged in head-on combat with Nazism ever since the Third Reich came to power, their activities were brought to an end between August 1939 and June 1941 by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, considered by some to be a serious error and openly criticised. The Palestinian Najati Sidqi, a delegate of the Red International of Labour Unions in Moscow, was excluded by ‘comrades’ in 1940 for publishing a series of articles detailing why Nazism was incompatible with Islam. In class terms, their movement perceived Zionism as an attempt by “Jewish capitalists” to draw “working class Jews” away from the objectives of the revolution. Furthermore, it fervently condemned the “complicity between Zionists and Nazis” on the Palestine question. Thus, in a speech delivered in 1943, the general secretary of the Communist Party, Ridwan al-Hilu, stated that “Zionism welcomes the anti-Jewish terror and [...] opposes any project likely to steer emigration towards any country other than Palestine, as was the case at the Évian Conference⁸ [...] when [...] the Jewish Agency opposed any project likely to divert the emigration of Jews from Palestine, preferring for them to remain in Germany under torture, terror and deprivation rather than transport them elsewhere⁹”.

In order to gauge the scope of the resistance movement against Nazism in the Arab world, we should, like Achcar, remember that, globally, there were more Arabs in the Allied armies or in Nazi concentration camps than there were volunteers fighting for the Axis powers.

After the Shoah

The *Nakba* – the expulsion of Palestinians following the creation of the State of Israel – dealt a fatal blow to liberal Occidentalists and Marxists, who were accused of having

⁸ During the international Évian Conference, held in July 1938, representatives from 32 countries including France, the United States and Great Britain, stated that they were not in a position to take any Jews – the French representative, for example, explained that France had reached “extreme saturation point with regard to foreigners”.

⁹ Quoted by Gilbert Achcar, p. 94. On this point, we should note that David Ben-Gurion, an ardent Zionist, stated that “the harder the affliction, the greater the force of Zionism” (Shabtai Teveth, *Ben Gurion: The Burning Ground, 1886-1948*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1987, p. 850, quoted by Achcar p. 34).

supported governments that were in favour of Zionism: during the 1948 war, Stalin provided weapons to the Haganah, the armed wing of the Zionist executive. Fundamentalist Pan-Islamism had been discredited by the Mufti's defeat and the Saudis' unconditional support for the British. Only the nationalist movement was strengthened by this ordeal, at least until the Arab defeat of 1967, before giving way to the shadowy rise of Islamism, as illustrated by the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

As from this period, two symmetrical ideological paradigms, one of neo-Zionist origin (prominent among Israeli intellectuals) and the other inspired by radical Islamism (found in Iran), gradually imposed themselves. Trapped in a narcissistic vision of the past, present and future, the spokesmen for these two models indulged in – and still indulge in – deplorable overstatement in their denial of the other's suffering and their exacerbation of their own suffering – *Nakba* against Shoah.

The terms of the equation are tragic. This determination to withdraw and remain incapable of showing empathy, this tendency to essentialise the other while positing the immutability of one's own being, is the disastrous trademark of our current era on the question of the Israel-Palestine conflict – excluding some movements that try to avoid taking such an attitude. We can see how making selective, indeed manipulative, use of the past serves merely to reinforce this situation. Instead of pathetically overstating one's own victimisation, it is vital to reach a point of understanding of the other's suffering, a stage that is unavoidable if there is to be true reconciliation. In this context, we can but welcome the exemplary nature of Gilbert Achcar's work, which strives for that outcome.

Translated from French by **Susannah Dale**.

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