Muslim Military Units in the German Reich

Fathi Habashi
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Background
The Soviet Union and Britain occupied many Muslim countries who wanted to be independent. They thought that the Nazi Party in Germany would help them from colonialism forgetting that they would replace one colonial power by another. The Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945) (Figure 1) personally believed that Islam created fearless soldiers because warriors are promised heaven if they fought and killed in action. He envisioned the creation of a SS divisions constituted solely of Muslims to fight the Communist although Slavs and other peoples were regarded as inferior in Nazi racial doctrine.

Bosnian Muslims
Himmler classified the Bosnian Muslims as Goths - a Germanic tribe that had settled the Balkans. He disregarded the fact that the Bosnian Muslims spoke a Slavic language, were part of a Slavic culture, and exhibited Slavic racial traits. The creation ceremony of the Bosnian Muslim Division was featured in newsreels and was described as the first Croatian SS volunteer organization at Zagreb Festival Square on May 12, 1943. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Al Haj Amin al-Husseini (1895-1974) (Figure 2) travelled to Sarajevo in 1943 to promote and to sponsor the division. He was the honorary commander of the two Muslim Divisions of the SS. He studied in Al Azhar University in Cairo and was a personal friend of Hassan El Banna the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the uncle of Yasser Arafat. The oath of loyalty of the new Division was sworn to Adolf Hitler. They had the symbol Handzar, an Ottoman dagger used by the Turkish police (Figure 3).

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1 All information and pictures were collected from many articles in Internet
2 SS is abbreviation of Schutzstaffel, i.e., Protection Squadron, a Nazi paramilitary organization
The Bosnian Muslim troops were allowed to wear the Ottoman Turkish fez and were given special privileges. They also observed Islamic prayer services at set times during the day. They spent most of their existence committing atrocities across the former Yugoslavia. Himmler wanted manpower that Bosnian Muslims could provide when German troop strength was devastated by losses on the Eastern Front in the Soviet Union.
The Handschar Division appeared in many of the most prominent magazines in the Third Reich (Figures 4 - 9). It was on the cover of the Cologne Illustrated Times, the Vienna Illustrated Times, and the Minsk Times. The division was also featured in the Berlin Illustrated Times. Himmler was filmed in the Die Deutsche Wochenschau German newsreel reviewing the division.

**Other Muslim Legions**
The initial victories of Operation Barbarossa produced hundreds of thousands of non-Russian soldier prisoners in the German Army. All of them were hungry and starving. In eight months of 1941-1942, the invading German armies killed about 2.8 million Soviet prisoners of war through starvation, exposure, and summary execution. In December 1941 two Muslim units were created: the Turkistanische Legion, consisting of Muslim volunteers from Central Asia and the Legion from Caucasian Muslims volunteers; such as Azeris, Dagestanis, Chechens, Ingushes, and Lezgins (Figure 10).

The Mufti first met with Adolf Hitler on November 25, 1941 (Figure 11) and fully supported Germany during the war. He worked closely with Himmler in recruiting Muslims for the SS, in occupied regions of the USSR, and in the Balkans particularly in Bosnia and Kosovo. In early 1944, an officer was assigned as the official liaison officer between the Mufti and the SS.

**Imam in the SS**
The Handschar divisional imam was Bosnian Muslim Husein Efendi Dzozo (1912-1982) (Figure 12). He graduated from Al-Azhar University in Cairo and volunteered for the Handschar
Division in June, 1943. He spoke Arabic fluently and had the rank of SS Haupsturmführer, or captain.

Figure 11- The Mufti first met with Adolf Hitler on November 25, 1941 in Berlin at the Reich Chancellery. A video of the meeting is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNF5Q0Uae3o

Figure 12- Husein Efendi Dzozo (1912-1982)

Figure 13- Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918)

**Islam and Germany**
The German connection to Islam goes back to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, which was fought in the Balkans. The War resulted after the Serbian Orthodox uprising in Hercegovina spread to Bosnia, then to Serbia and Montenegro. Russia intervened in the war against Ottoman Turkey in 1877. This war resulted in the defeat of the Ottomans. As a result, Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918) (Figure 13) requested German assistance in reorganizing and training the Army. The key German adviser was Baron Wilhelm Leopold Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz. His duty in Turkey lasted 12 years. After his military service, he acquired the title of Pasha. The results of German training bore fruit - - Turkey was able to defeat Greece in the 1897 Greco-Turkish War.

The German connection to Islam had increased by the late 19th century when the growth of German influence in the Ottoman Empire increased. This expansionist policy threatened the interests of Great Britain, France, and Russia. Emperor William II visited Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria in 1898. The alliance with Germany became so strong that the Young Turk government of Turkey made the decision to ally with Germany during World War but was defeated by British troops under General Edmund Allenby.

**CONCLUSION**
The creation of the Muslim Division in the Nazi army demonstrated how differences could be exploited and manipulated to create enmity and conflict and to turn people against each other. The Nazi Party exploited Islam to advance the geopolitical objectives of Germany.

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