

The Making of Muslim Communities in Western Europe, 1914–1939

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I. INTRODUCTION

Muslim presence in western Europe is not a recent phenomenon resulting from the postcolonial and worker migrations of the 1950s and 1960s. In most western European metropolises, Muslim life flourished and was institutionalized for the first time during the interwar period. In France, the *Grande Mosquée de Paris* was inaugurated in July 1926, immediately fuelling debates in London about launching a similar project in the British capital. In 1928, the first mosque opened in Berlin-Wilmersdorf. Muslims across western Europe began to organize themselves, setting up institutions varying from mosques and schools to cemeteries and publications.

Although there is a vast and rapidly growing body of literature on Muslims in contemporary Europe, this research usually lacks a historical perspective, generally containing little information about the history of Islam in western European societies.¹ This is surprising given the profound research in the field over the last decade.² The major historiographical problem is, however, that most of the research done so far is scattered, limited to local and regional studies, and has so far not been connected. Addressing this problem, this article is an attempt to provide the first comprehensive, though concise, account of the history of Muslim life in western Europe before World War II.

Most scholars perceive Muslim presence in western Europe as a result of the labor and postcolonial mass migrations of the postwar

period. It is certainly true that Islam became more visible in the public sphere in western Europe as a result of Muslim mass immigration to major European industrial countries in the second half of the twentieth century. Another reason why only few studies have addressed the issue is because their research has focused on national or ethnic rather than religious categories, examining the histories of Turks, Persians, Indians, or Arabs in countries like Germany, France, and Great Britain.³ The Muslim identities and Islamic practices of these communities have been considered to be of secondary importance, outpaced by language, color, or nationality, which were seen as the key signifiers of individual and collective difference. Looking through the lens of religion, the following pages focus on the founding of local Muslim communities in Germany, Great Britain, and France during and after World War I.

The making of these early Muslim communities was part of the much wider historical phenomenon of migration and the emergence of new minorities in the global age. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, small minority groups started to appear worldwide—Chinatowns in Hamburg or Chicago, Japanese communities in Hawaii or Sao Paolo, Russian groups in Shanghai or Helsinki or, say, Lebanese communities in Senegal. Some of these groups organized themselves not only on ethnic or national, but also on religious grounds—Sikh communities in Manchester, Buddhist groups in Berlin or Muslim minorities in South Shields or Paris, for instance. While much research has been done on ethnic diaspora communities in the global age, we know less about the birth of these faith communities. These groups formed new kinds of religious minorities, characterized by mobility and embedded in global religious networks.

Indeed, the history of Muslim minorities in interwar western Europe is, after all, a history of global interconnection and mobility. Most of the religious minorities that have been studied, such as Jews in Europe, Christians in the Middle East, or Muslims in Russia, India, or East Asia, have a long history within their majority societies. Accordingly, religious minority history has been written primarily as local (or national) history, addressing the relationship between minority and majority society. The presence of organized Muslim communities in western European countries is a relatively new phenomenon, however, forming part of the worldwide integration processes that began in the late nineteenth century. A history of Muslim communities in western Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is, first of all, a history of migration and settlement, the

creation of Muslim space and the implementation of Muslim presence in a non-Muslim environment. The making of these communities involved a transfer of cultural practices, lifestyles, codes, meanings, and organizing principles from one place (Muslim countries) to another (western European cities). In the new setting, a unique and hybrid Muslim space was created that was shaped both by the new, non-Muslim environment and the wider Muslim world. Even in the period following the actual settlement, these minorities maintained international links.⁴ In fact, Muslim minorities in interwar Europe were characterized by a continuous flow of people and information. Consequently, they cannot be studied as a local phenomenon, shaped by their relationship with the majority society alone. Rather, their study needs also to take into account influences from the wider Islamic world. Furthermore, the few Muslim communities that did take root in interwar Europe were also entangled with one another.

The following pages address the actual processes of formal organization and institutionalization of Muslim life in western Europe, as it was shaped by both the majority society and the wider Islamic world. The institutionalization of Muslim life, as reflected in the formal organization of Muslim communities, is a classic characteristic of Islamic diaspora communities. In Islamic societies, the creation of distinctive Muslim spaces was essentially unnecessary. In the diaspora, however, the physical and legal place of minorities within the majority society and state as well as the organization of religious life became crucial issues. An institutional framework provided a safe space for religious practices and rituals like feasts, marriages, and funerals.

The “making of Muslim space” will be discussed in three parts.⁵ First, the emergence of mosques as *physical religious spaces*; second, the development of associations and organizations as *legal spaces*; and finally, the construction of *communicative and intellectual spaces*, expressed in Islamic newspapers and journals.

The scope of this chapter has limitations. First, it concerns only those individuals who identified themselves as “Muslims.” Thus, it draws on a cultural rather than a theological definition of “Muslim.” Second, it concentrates primarily on Muslims who organized themselves in Islamic organizations and formed groups identifiably organized by religion within the majority society. “Muslim community” is defined as a network of these individuals (often of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds) based on their common faith.⁶ The following pages will not concentrate on the many Muslims who had not organized themselves in religious groups, or who were not affiliated with any official organization. To be sure, many Muslims were neither organized

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