

Post-war Antisemitism: Germany's Foreign Policy Toward Egypt

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1. INTRODUCTION

After 1948, every country that was diplomatically involved in the Middle East conflict was confronted with Arab hostility toward Israel and was therefore challenged with the task of reacting to such animosity. A new antisemitism emerged that was directed against the very existence of a Jewish state. This gives rise to several important questions. How did diplomats react to Arab animosity toward Israel? Did Arab antisemitism play a role in the conceptions of foreign policy? If so, was this topic actually brought up with Arab states? Did diplomats do anything to confront this problem?¹

While these questions emerged for all diplomats, German diplomats had to address more specific concerns. Especially in Egypt, they were confronted with the ramifications of German antisemitic propaganda and politics, which many of them had personally designed and promoted only a few years earlier. The Middle East policy of the Nazis had been anti-British in design and antisemitic in essence. Especially during the second half of World War II, Germany had employed considerable efforts to incite Arabs to fight against Germany's enemies via radio propaganda with a distinctly antisemitic, anti-British, and anti-American character, as Jeffrey Herf convincingly describes in his illuminating book on this subject.² The Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, was a close ally of the Nazis and had played a major role in programming propaganda broadcasts into the Arab World.³ In the post-war years, the Mufti—although he had been

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¹ For the sake of clarity, Arab hostility toward Israel is not necessarily antisemitic. However, there is a point when political enmity opposing Zionism crosses over into antisemitism, for example when there is a positive reference to Nazi antisemitism or when the acceptance and dissemination of conspiracy theories like the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is involved. Holocaust denial is also an important aspect of this new antisemitism.

² Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, New Haven and London, 2009. See also Matthias Küntzel, "Nationalsozialismus und Antisemitismus in der arabischen Welt," in Doron Rabinovici, Ulrich Speck and Natan Sznaider (eds.), *Neuer Antisemitismus? Eine globale Debatte*, Frankfurt am Main, 2004.

³ Cf., e.g., Klaus Gensicke, *Der Mufti von Jerusalem und die Nationalsozialisten. Eine politische Biographie Amin el-Husseinis*, Darmstadt, 2007; Josef Boris Schechtmann, *The Mufti and the Fuehrer. The Rise and Fall of Haj Amin el-Husseini*, New York, 1965; Zvi Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, Shmuel Himelstein (ed.), London, 1993; Matthias Küntzel, *Jihad and Jew-Hatred. Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11*, New York, 2007.

involved in war crimes — was a figure of considerable political influence in Egypt, and his Nazi-like antisemitism affected the Palestinian national movement and the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt. Then there was the circle of young officers including Abdel Nasser and Anwar as-Sadat. In July 1952, they seized power in Egypt in a military coup d'état. During World War II, both of them had collaborated with the Germans as guerrilla fighters.⁴ As politicians, Nasser and Sadat both recommended the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" as an important source of information on the nature of Israel and the Jewish people. Nasser's brother Sauqi Abdannasir personally edited an Arabic translation of the "Protocols," and under Nasser's presidency in the 1950s one of the most radical antisemitic publicists of the Third Reich, Johann von Leers, who had been an open advocate of Jewish genocide, was employed in the Egyptian propaganda ministry. He was in charge of propaganda against Israel and organized lectures for Egyptian officials.⁵ Bernard Lewis is one of many historians who have pointed out how German National Socialism was openly praised in post-war Egypt. This was the political climate faced by German diplomats in Egypt at the beginning of the 1950s.⁶

In this article, I will focus on two questions. The first question concerns whether German foreign policy sent signals to the Arab world that were understood as support for Arab hostility toward Israel. The most important examples of this are Germany's refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Israel until 1965 and the support provided to Egypt's military and arms industry by German experts. The second question concerns whether there was a transfer of ideas from the Nazi era to the post-war period. In this context, I will examine perceptions of Zionism and how decisions that helped to delegitimize the Jewish state were connected to the Nazi heritage. My research therefore also touches on the issue of the German political elite's relationship with its Nazi past.

2. THE IMPACT OF GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY ON ARAB HOSTILITY TOWARD ISRAEL

Usually, the historiography of German-Arab relations begins in 1952. In October of that year, Günther Pawelke, the first West German ambassador, arrived in Cairo. But his arrival was not the first chapter in German-Egyptian relations after World War II. Another group of Germans had arrived two years earlier, led by Dr. Wilhelm Voss, a former high-ranking SS officer (*SS-Standartenführer*). Voss had been one of Nazi Germany's leading managers. In 1937, he was appointed general manager of the *Reichswerke Hermann Göring*. During World War II he also headed several large armament conglomerates, mainly in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. Czech companies and trusts were bought or dispossessed and integrated into Nazi conglomerates, two of which were led by Voss (*Skoda* and *Brünner Waffenfabrik*). The *Göring-Werke* employed more than 1.8 million forced laborers, POWs, and concentration camp prisoners. In Voss' area of operations, at least 18,000 people died of brutal abuse, a consequence of the murderous

⁴ Anwar el-Sadat, *Die ägyptische Revolution*, Eugen Diederichs Verlag, Düsseldorf, Köln, 1970, p. 55ff.

⁵ Cf. Records "von Leers" in Political Archive of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereinafter, PA AA), AV Neues Amt Kairo, vol. 18.933. See particularly the report of Ritter to Bonn, March 12, 1957, *ibid*.

⁶ Cf. Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Antisemites*, New York/London, 1986, p. 160.

violence of the SS police state that was imported into the war economy and the concept of "annihilation through work," which was first implemented at the *Reichswerke*.⁷ Voss was also a member of the so-called "circle of friends of Heinrich Himmler" (until 1935 the "circle of friends of the *Reichsführer SS*"), a group of about 40 leading SS officers, Nazis, and German industrialists who advised the Nazi Party on economic matters and supported the party financially. Voss thus belonged to the elite circles of the Nazi regime.⁸

Voss arrived in Egypt at the end of 1950, after spending time in an American detention camp and under house arrest in Germany for about five years. He was stationed in the Ministry of War, where he laid the foundations for the Egyptian arms industry. He also brought several former generals and officers of the German armed forces to Egypt. This group of advisers, who served from 1951 to 1958, was comprised of up to 60 German officers. Wilhelm Fahrmbacher, a former general, headed the subgroup that was located within the Egyptian army.⁹ Fahrmbacher's office was next to the office of the Egyptian Chief of Staff, and they worked closely together.¹⁰ Although the advisers stressed that their job was purely of a consultative nature and that they did not hold command positions, they were clearly involved in military preparations. Beyond documents concerning consultation on operative, strategic, and tactical questions, I have also found plans for military operations against Israel in Fahrmbacher's papers.¹¹ The group came to Egypt when King Farouk was still in power. However, Voss and Fahrmbacher kept their positions after the coup against Farouk in July 1952. According to CIA sources, Fahrmbacher helped the "free officers," the circle around Nasser and Naguib, to prepare a plan for the army's internal control in Cairo in case there would be a revolution.¹²

Voss accompanied Egyptian officials on their trips to Germany and served as an intermediary to German industrial circles. He also maintained contacts with West German officials in the Foreign Office, the Trade Ministry, the Chancellery, and the Ministry of Defense, which was then in the process of being set up. Some observers considered his

⁷ August Meyer, *Das Syndikat. Reichswerke "Hermann Göring,"* Braunschweig, 1986, pp. 146-148.

⁸ Cf. digest of the protocols of the interrogation of Dr. Wilhelm Voss by Mr. Barr in Nuremberg on December 11, 1946, December 20, 1946, January 23, 1947, January 15, 1947, January 31, 1947, and April 16, 1947 in PA AA, B11, vol. 739.

⁹ For information on Wilhelm Fahrmbacher, see his papers in *Militärarchiv—Bundesarchiv* (Freiburg/Germany), N194. In 1941, Fahrmbacher was commanding general of the VII Battalion that was involved in the war against Russia. From 1942 to 1945, he was a commanding general in Brittany and Normandy, France.

¹⁰ See report of Wilhelm Fahrmbacher on his activities in Egypt in *Militärarchiv—Bundesarchiv*, Papers Fahrmbacher, N194, vol. 27, p. 14.

¹¹ Hubert Diermayer, "Graphic representation of my memo 'How foundation of organization and mobilization is laid,'" July 1954, in Papers Fahrmbacher, *Militärarchiv—Bundesarchiv*, Bestand N194, vol. 12, p. 134-140. Oskar Munzel, a member of the German military experts group, announced in 1953 that the Egyptian army was primarily preparing for a war with Israel. See British Embassy Cairo to Foreign Office, February 6, 1953, PRO FO 371/102869, quoted in Michael Wolffsohn and Ulrich Brochhagen, *Hakenkreuze unterm Burnus? Großbritannien und die deutschen Militärberater in Ägypten 1951-1956*, 1992, p. 525.

¹² CIA report, September 5, 1952, in National Archives II, CIA Name Files, 2nd Release, RG 263, Box Nr. 133.

influence in Cairo and Germany to be higher than that of Germany's official ambassador, Günther Pawelke, and rumor spread in intelligence circles that Voss would soon become an official West German representative.¹³

The position of Günther Pawelke, the first official German ambassador to Egypt, was therefore not easy. The Foreign Ministry expected him to cooperate with Voss, and while the two got along well in the beginning conflicts began to emerge in April 1953, when Pawelke was concerned that Voss was acting against German interests.¹⁴ One claim was that he was cooperating with Communists, another that he maintained close contacts with the Arab and German circles around Mufti Amin el-Husseini and German businessman Joachim Hertslet, a committed and high-ranking Nazi who had worked for the Reich Ministry of Economic Affairs. Hertslet was the leading force behind a campaign in the Arab states against the German compensation payments to Israel. (The Federal Republic committed itself to supply goods in the amount of DM 3.45 billion to Israel and to pay DM 450 million to the Jewish Claims Conference.)

In the end, it was Pawelke who decided to resign and leave Egypt in 1954 after he refused to cooperate with Voss, while the former SS man remained in his position. But Voss' influence also faded, particularly after British Prime Minister Winston Churchill publicly criticized the activities of the ex-Nazis working as military advisers in May 1953 and accused them of training Egyptian guerrilla units that attacked British troops stationed in the Suez Canal zone. The German government then sent an official to Cairo who met with the advisers and gave them strict guidelines. The group was separated into two different units and lost a great deal of its influence with the Egyptian government around 1954. In spite of the British criticism, the above-mentioned German official highly valued the work of the Germans in Egypt, which he described as a "positive political fact" for Germany. He recommended exerting influence on the group and giving them a "feeling of official comradesly support."¹⁵

I believe that, in utilizing these contacts, the German government also sent a political message to the Egyptian government, signaling that former SS men were accepted mediators and negotiators, not to mention the fact that their function was to assist Egypt in its war against Israel.

3. THE TRANSFER OF IDEAS FROM THE NAZI ERA TO THE POST-WAR PERIOD

This brings me to my second point, the question whether there was a transfer of ideas from the Nazi era to the post-war period. I want to illustrate this question by focusing on the case of one diplomat. Wilhelm Melchers was employed in the German Foreign Office from 1925. He was appointed director of the Near East department in December 1939 and held this position until the end of the war.¹⁶ Jeffrey Herf describes how he was

¹³ CIA report, August 29, 1952, in National Archives II, CIA Name Files, 2nd Release, RG 263, Box Nr. 133.

¹⁴ Note Allardt, June 16, 1953, in PA AA, B2 VS, vol. 186A.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ From 1931 to 1934 he served in the Near East department under the leadership of Fritz Grobba, from 1935 to 1937 he worked at the embassy in Tehran, and from February 1938 to September 1939 he held the position of consul in Haifa. Between 1951 and 1954, Kurt Munzel worked as Melchers' deputy. During the Nazi period, Munzel was the head of the radio department and

involved in developing antisemitic propaganda for the Arab world.¹⁷ After the war, from 1951 to 1953, Melchers once again headed the Near East department. He thus wielded considerable influence over Germany's Near East policy and the re-establishment of West Germany's relations with Arab countries. From 1953 until 1957, Melchers was the head of the German embassy in Baghdad. During this time, he was also in charge of the legation in Jordan and for reports on Israel.

The way in which an antisemitic conception of Zionism influenced Melchers' assessment of the Near East conflict after the war is evident from some of his reports. In 1955, he sent a report from Baghdad analyzing Israel's policies, in which he described the Jewish state as being of an "expansionist nature." Israel in its present form, he argued, would establish a "bridgehead" providing the basis for future "generous expansion." An "uncompromising attitude" on the Arab side was therefore understandable, and a peaceful solution to the conflict impossible. The Arabs would "feel safe only after the last Jew had left Palestine."¹⁸

This report reveals how deeply Melchers' thoughts were still influenced by Nazi conceptions. The idea that the Jews were intending to combine Palestine with Syria and Transjordan in a "huge Jewish home" had been among the core ideas of Nazi propaganda for the Arab world, as well as predictions concerning the murderous policies of the Jews toward the Arabs in Palestine and elsewhere.¹⁹ Melchers' conclusion that it was impossible for Arab countries to tolerate even a small Jewish minority on Palestinian soil reveals his anti-Jewish worldview.

In what way did this worldview affect West Germany's foreign policy? The most controversial issues in German post-war Middle East policy concerned the character of German relations with Israel. After the debate on compensation payments in 1952, the main question was whether Germany should establish diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. The debate cannot be explored in detail here; however, the result was that Germany refused to establish diplomatic ties with Israel until 1965.²⁰ The decision in favor of this policy was made in 1956, when a secret conference of German ambassadors

responsible for the Nazi propaganda for the Arab world. Thus, two diplomats who had worked on antisemitic incitement were now responsible for reports and assessments on Israel and the Near East conflict in the Foreign Office. Melchers' successor as head of the Near East department, Hermann Voigt, had also been in the service of the Foreign Office since 1921. For a general overview of the staff of the Foreign Office, see Hans-Jürgen Döscher, *Verschworene Gesellschaft. Das Auswärtige Amt unter Adenauer zwischen Neubeginn und Kontinuität*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1995; cf. also Eckart Conze, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes, and Moshe Zimmermann, *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit. Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik*, Munich, 2010.

¹⁷ Herf, *supra* note 2, at pp. 38, 55, 74 and other pages.

¹⁸ Melchers to Foreign Office, March 21, 1955, in PA AA, Papers Wilhelm Melchers, Bd. 64.

¹⁹ See Herf, *supra* note 2, at p. 102.

²⁰ It is typical for the German context that politicians did not openly announce this policy. In negotiations with Israeli intermediaries, German politicians instead stressed that they were willing to establish relations at a later date. For an overview, see Dominique Trimbur, *De la Shoah à la réconciliation? La question des relations RFA et Israël (1949-1956)*, Paris, 2000; Yeshayahu A. Jelinek (ed.), *Zwischen Moral und Realpolitik. Deutsch-israelische Beziehungen 1945-1965. Eine Dokumentensammlung*, Gerlingen, 1997, p. 44ff; Niels Hansen, *Aus dem Schatten der Katastrophe: die deutsch-israelischen Beziehungen in der Ära Konrad Adenauer und David Ben Gurion. Ein dokumentierter Bericht*, Düsseldorf, 2002.

who represented Germany in Middle Eastern states took place in Istanbul. The German ambassadors attending the conference unanimously opposed the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel, fearing protests from Arab countries and — as a consequence — Arab diplomatic recognition of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). They even voted against the establishment of a trade mission, which was subsequently cancelled despite prior promises.²¹

Wilhelm Melchers was one of the first and most outspoken advocates in this debate. His reasons are expressed in a letter that he sent to the German Foreign Office in July 1955. In this letter, he painted a grim picture of what would happen should Germany establish diplomatic relations with Israel:

The establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel would cause a storm of outrage in Arab countries and would inflict serious damage to our political, economic, and cultural interests. ... It would definitely unsettle the German-Arab friendship and — due to the Arab mentality — would turn friendship into hate, because the Arab countries would not forgive the betrayal of a good friend.²²

Melchers here refers to a crucial point. Arab diplomats were convinced that Germany had acted under foreign pressure when it signed the Luxembourg Treaty, which regulated the compensation payments to Israel, in 1952. After Germany regained its sovereignty in 1955, the Arab world expected the German government to refrain from any step in favor of Israel. It is clear that Melchers was well aware of the anti-Israel component of the so-called German-Arab friendship. Moreover, he was clearly unwilling to give up the advantages he expected to obtain from Germany's Nazi legacy.

The idea that Germany had been forced to sign the Luxembourg Treaty was indeed very widespread in the Arab world. Although this was not true, it is correct that the compensation payments were not very popular in Germany or among German politicians. Inside the Foreign Office in West Germany, however, overt Nazi-like anti-semitism and anti-Zionism was taboo. Germany's main aim in foreign policy was to be integrated economically and strategically in the Western alliance. It was crucial to establish a new image of a democratic society and to demonstrate a new beginning. As the U.S. High Commissioner John McCloy observed, Adenauer understood that "the way Germany acts toward the Jews in the future will be the acid test of German democracy."²³ Consequently, Adenauer often stressed that the compensation payments to Israel that he announced in September 1951 were a "necessity" to regain credibility in the Western world, in order to obtain credit and business contracts. In retrospect, the moral side of the question was not sufficiently emphasized. Historian Wageh Atek

²¹ Cf. PA AA, B2, vols. 93 and 94.

²² Melchers to Foreign Office, July 29, 1955, quoted in Jelinek, *supra* note 20, at p. 342ff. German diplomats feared that Germany would consequently lose important economic contracts, as well as Arab support at the United Nations, and that Arab states would support the East German socialist state instead. In addition, the Federal Republic would face heavy losses in the cultural arena. The future of German schools in the Arab world would also be in trouble. At the conference in Istanbul, Melchers added another argument: The lives of German embassy staff and members of the German colonies would no longer be safe. See PA AA, B2, vols. 93 and 94.

²³ John McCloy on July 30, 1949, quoted in: Kurt Birrenbach, *Meine Sondermissionen. Rückblick auf zwei Jahrzehnte bundesdeutscher Außenpolitik*, Düsseldorf/Vienna, 1984, p. 84.

quotes Egyptian sources revealing that Adenauer personally stated in front of an Arab delegation that the issue of reparations to Israel had been regulated in accordance with the wishes of the United States.²⁴ Under-Secretary of State Hallstein reportedly said to the Egyptian Consul General in Frankfurt: "It is not possible not to sign the agreement. Israel through the Jewish magnifying glass in America and England is stronger than one assumes. It is impossible for the federal government to take counter-action."²⁵ In those statements, the antisemitic stereotype of Jewish power was given a new lease of life. It is therefore not surprising that many Arab politicians and journalists were under the impression that antisemitic and anti-Israeli views still prevailed in Germany and that the German government would have supported the Arab side in the conflict if it had been completely sovereign.

The above statement is not documented in German protocols of meetings between Hallstein and Egyptian representatives. According to German sources, Hallstein explained, on the one hand, that the decision to sign the Luxemburg Treaty originated from the desire of the German people to "wipe away" the "blemish" on the German honor resulting from the crimes against the Jews. On the other hand, he emphasized that Germany was not able not to ratify the agreement, as this would be "suicide."²⁶ Melchers made a similar argument in a meeting with the King of Jordan. He wired to Bonn that he had informed King Hussein that "the Arabs could not expect Germany to commit suicide, only to save their Arab friends from harm...."²⁷ Moreover, Chancellor Adenauer argued that the "power of the Jews, particularly in America" was one of the most important reasons for him to seek reconciliation with the Jewish people.²⁸

4. CONCLUSION

In these and similar statements, German politicians and diplomats highlighted that they had not been completely free in their decisions. It is therefore not surprising that German diplomats failed to convey the message of a new, non-antisemitic Germany to the Arab states until 1965. This failure became obvious in a report sent to Bonn from the German embassy in Cairo in the summer of 1964. This report stated that the Egyptian government was convinced of the "existence of another, real, national Germany" that was hiding behind the official one. Nasser perceived the official Germany to be under pressure from Zionist circles and tried to encourage the "hidden Germany" to emerge for closer cooperation with Egypt.²⁹ This analysis was made after President Nasser gave an exclusive interview to the *Deutsche National- und Soldatenzeitung*, a radical right-wing

²⁴ Wageh Atek, "Der Standpunkt Ägyptens zur westdeutschen Wiedergutmachung an Israel," in *Orient* 24(3), 1983, pp. 470-485.

²⁵ Cf. Note 75, October 17, 1952, from the Egyptian Consulate General in Frankfurt to the Egyptian Foreign Office in Cairo, File: "Reports from the Egyptian Consulate General from Germany 1952-1953". Quoted in Atek, *supra* note 24, at p. 476.

²⁶ Meeting of Hallstein with an Arab delegation, October 22, 1952, in PA AA, B11, vol. 252.

²⁷ Melchers to Foreign Office in Bonn, December 28, 1953, in B11, Bd. 1389.

²⁸ Adenauer in an interview on *Sender Freies Berlin* with Günter Gaus, December 29, 1965.

²⁹ Report on National Socialists and German scientists in Egypt, undated, author unknown. This report was written by a journalist who was in close contact with the embassy and clearly had access to embassy files. See PA AA, B36, vol. 140.

German journal circulating in Nazi circles, in May 1964. In this interview, Nasser described the Holocaust as a “myth” and announced that Egypt would crush Israel.³⁰

During the 1950s and early 1960s, German diplomats in Arab countries were aware of the fact that they enjoyed considerable advantages in Arab countries compared to other Western states because of their refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. In the words of von Waldow, a legation councillor at the German embassy in Baghdad:

There has been a strong argument in favor of the Federal Republic: the fact that Germany, in contrast to other Western democracies, has no diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. If we lose this argument in the future, the only defensive weapon we possess will be beaten out of our hands.³¹

Voices like these dominated the debate in the Foreign Office at that time. Antisemitism in the Arab states was not criticized by German diplomats, nor was Holocaust-denial. Former high-ranking German Nazis were accepted as interlocutors in Egypt. A highly ambivalent policy toward Israel added to the delegitimization of the Jewish state. The episodes described in this article show how strongly antisemitism and complicity with Arab hostility toward Israel informed Germany’s foreign policy in the post-war years.

³⁰ “Krieg mit Israel unvermeidbar. Warnung an Bonn, doch Liebeserklärung an Deutschland.” Interview with Gamal Abdel Nasser in *Deutsche National- und Soldatenzeitung*, May 1, 1964.

³¹ Note von Waldow, July 26, 1955, quoted in Jelinek, *supra* note 20, at p. 340.