CHAPTER 6

The Berlin Mosque Library as a Site of Religious Exchange


The purchase of a series of international journals marks a novel phase in the work of the mission, namely the organization of a library encompassing no less than twenty languages, offering the latest books and journals on Islam, the science of religion, Muslim modernity, and religious reform. A closer look at this collection will allow the reader to form some idea of how Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah picked his way through the many publications on religion and modernity that were published in the 1930s in Europe and beyond. The analysis serves to illuminate the manner in which this missionary adapted core Ahmadiyya reform proposals for religious progress and grafted them onto European modernity discourses in the 1930s in Berlin.

By 1930, Germany had seen enough crises to make people clamour for stability and, during that year, the catastrophe continued to unfold. In January, war reparations were calculated to last until as late as 1988. During spring, street fighting between the left and right increased, while National Socialist groups provoked street terror. During the September elections, Hitler’s party, the National Socialist German Democratic Workers’ Party (NSDAP or Nazi Party),

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1. MR 4 (1930) iii.
2. Zali Bul is a Tatar journal edited by A. Ishaki in Warsaw. As the title is written in Latin characters, the reading may have several meanings: ‘Be Brave,’ but also ‘Be National.’ With thanks to Marat Gibatdinow from the Tatar Academy of Sciences in Kazan for his comments.
jumped from 12 to 107 seats, overtaking the communists and gaining second place in parliament.³ Tired of the never-ending crisis, novelists and artists, from right to left, praised the new ‘no-nonsense’ attitude that was finally meeting expectations.⁴

It was not only in Germany that people considered politics of the ‘iron fist’ a real alternative; 1930 marked a decisive year for all of Europe. In *Dark Continent*, Mark Mazower recounts how in that year a whole range of European countries moved to the right.⁵ Some 12 years after the fall of the European empires, the parliamentary system was experiencing a real crisis. Everywhere in Europe (with the exception of the Nordic countries), cabinets sat for an average of only four to eight months, while short-tempered deputies hurled chairs and insults at each other. In each country, as many as 16, 19, or more parties came to represent ever-smaller sections of the population.⁶ Mazower’s famous argument was that the crisis of the left in Germany was not an isolated political phenomenon – once the Great Depression of 1929 had added its weight to the mounting political unrest, one European government after another turned to right-wing solutions. As a consequence, as in Germany, authoritarian or fascist regimes assumed power in Italy, Spain, Poland, Romania, Greece and Hungary.⁷

Outside Europe political unrest left its mark as well. The Russian government for instance, wielding an iron fist in a communist glove, closed down churches, mosques and synagogues; the country’s large farming territories were also dispossessed, thereby robbing Russian citizens of their most basic supplies. In Palestine, anti-Jewish riots impelled the British government to issue a series of ‘white papers’ closing Palestine to Jewish immigration. This again encouraged the Mufti of Jerusalem, a global player who will make his entry in the next chapter, to start rallying for the pan-Islamic congress that eventually took place in Jerusalem the following year. In British India, Mahatma Gandhi’s party repeatedly clashed with the colonial administration, undermining British certainties as the unrest continued.

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⁶ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 16–18.