

## COMBATANTS OF MUSLIM ORIGIN IN EUROPEAN ARMIES

*Combatants of Muslim Origin in European Armies in the Twentieth Century: Far from Jihad.*

Edited by Xavier Bougarel, Raphaëlle Branche, and Cloé Drieu.

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**Key Words:** Islam, military, North Africa, identity, comparative.

In this wide-ranging edited collection, Xavier Bougarel, Raphaëlle Branche, and Cloé Drieu bring together a diverse array of scholars and case studies to explore the role combatants of Muslim origin played in European armies in the twentieth century. Islam thus serves as a ‘prism’ through which to understand how Muslim combatants were recruited, trained, supervised, and deployed in armies with non-Muslim majorities during the two world wars, when the use of such soldiers reached ‘unparalleled highs’ (2). Without using ‘Muslim’ in a homogenising manner, the volume also seeks to assess how religion informed the allegiances, identities, and behaviours of the soldiers themselves. The result is a series of contributions that are finely attuned to the diversity of the men being studied. As the subtitle suggests, this history is ‘far from jihad’ since the Islam that emerges in this book is not driven by abstract, ideological principles, but rather is firmly rooted in local cultural traditions and social rituals that manifested primarily in ‘everyday practices and a quest for individual salvation’ (13).

The collection opens with a chapter by the eminent historian of Algeria, Gilbert Meynier, who passed away recently. It documents the integration of Muslim Algerians into the French Army during the First World War and the political significance of these processes. While there is not much here that is new to scholars already familiar with Meynier’s impressive body of work in French, it is valuable to have a summary in English of his key arguments. The chapter also reminds us how pioneering was Meynier’s decision to centre the experiences of Muslim Algerians in his scholarship, thus laying the foundations for precisely the kind of research that this volume aims to carry forward.

Emmanuelle Cronier’s chapter follows, which offers an assessment of what food can reveal about how cultural identities were ‘challenged, preserved or encouraged’ by the British and French armies during the First World War (47). Tanja Bühner’s chapter on Muslim *askaris* in the German Colonial Army, or *Schutztruppe*, highlights the continuities between the colonial era and the First World War, notably the link German military commanders perceived between Islam and valued martial qualities such as discipline, duty, and honour. Two chapters on Russia showcase the relationship between Muslim minorities and the Slavic Russian majority in both world wars, giving prominence to the complex interaction between religious identity and patriotism.

Using the example of Turkish Muslim soldiers, Salvat M. Iskhakov reveals how the events of 1917 were seized upon by members of this community as an opportunity to push for political autonomy via the creation of Muslim military units. Kiril Feferman charts a parallel case in the later stages of the Second World War, by showing how the experience of serving together and being perceived as a collective group created a

religiously-informed sense of identity among Central Asian soldiers who had previously defined themselves primarily along ethnic lines. In contrast, Bougarel's study of Muslim soldiers in the 13<sup>th</sup> Division of the Waffen SS demonstrates the limits of Islam as a source of cohesion, when manipulated from above by non-Muslim powers in accordance with their precepts and priorities. Bougarel's central point is that Islam was a 'convenient' religion, to be instrumentalized where beneficial, but never to be allowed to take precedence over the objectives of National Socialism. The idea that religious accommodation always came second to political and military goals is equally evident in Claire Miot's portrait of Europeans who were employed as Officers for Muslim Military Affairs in the French First Army; they were tasked with simultaneously caring for and controlling Muslim combatants. Shifting to the domain of medical history, Julie Le Gac assesses the role attributed to Islam in shaping the supposedly unique North African psyche and how this impacted the treatment of war neuroses among soldiers from that region during the Second World War. Daniel Owen Spence's concluding chapter on Muslim soldiers in British colonial navies provides 'a unique naval interpretation to the volume's major questions' (206). This contribution is the only one to venture beyond official archives, using oral histories to include the voices of Muslim soldiers, which are otherwise notable mostly for their absence.

As mentioned by the editors and several contributors, sources from the perspective of the Muslim combatants are rare, and even access to official documentation about these men can be difficult, as Feferman in particular explains. Nonetheless, there are ways of reading 'against the grain' and otherwise creatively mining the administrative sources that dominate this collection, which could have yielded more evidence of how the events, policies, and practices documented here were experienced, understood, and engaged by Muslim combatants. Equally, while a key strength of this volume is its breadth, both within and across the chapters, this sometimes comes at the expense of analytical depth. However, having access to such a wealth of information about this understudied subject is invaluable. *Combatants of Muslim Origin* has thus started an ambitious and important conversation that will hopefully stimulate further research and exchange.

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## FOOD, FARMING, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN ETHIOPIA

*Ploughing New Ground: Food, Farming, and Environmental Change in Ethiopia.*

By Getnet Bekele.

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*Ploughing New Ground* by Getnet Bekele explores long-term changes and transformations in agricultural production and the environment in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ethiopia. It investigates the complex ways in which social, economic, political, and climatic