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# German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Marc David Baer, *German, Jew, Muslim, Gay: The Life and Times of Hugo Marcus*

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*German Historical Institute London Bulletin*  
Vol. XLIV, No. 2 (Nov. 2022), 159–62

ISSN 0269-8552

MARC DAVID BAER, *German, Jew, Muslim, Gay: The Life and Times of Hugo Marcus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 320 pp. ISBN 978 0 231 19670 3 (hardback), \$95.00/£74.00; ISBN 978 0 231 19671 0 (paperback), \$30.00/£25.00

The book under review here has received attention and appreciation from scholars of religion and of Islamic, Jewish, and sexuality studies. It is an important book, and in five well-written chapters, the author narrates the life and times of Hugo Marcus (1880–1966). Marcus lived a difficult but interesting life as a Jewish gay man who converted to Islam in interwar Berlin. His intellectual biography provides a chance to explore various facets of German history in turbulent times.

Chapter one examines Marcus's involvement in the gay rights movement led by Magnus Hirschfeld and a wider scholarly and activist circle in Berlin. The second chapter documents Marcus's queer conversion to Islam at the Ahmadiyya mosque and maps out the vibrant Muslim community in interwar Berlin. The third chapter looks at Hugo Hamid Marcus's changing fortunes as he navigated his Jewish past and Muslim convert identity during the violent rise of the Nazi regime and the transformation of German society. Chapter four takes us through the difficult history of Jewish persecution and Marcus's escape from Nazi Germany to a relatively safe but discriminatory exile in Switzerland. The significant final chapter examines the literary expression of Marcus's complex life as a gay writer, his literary influences, and the friends who supported him in his lonely last years until his death in 1966. The introduction looks at the existing historiography and the resulting conceptual problems and possibilities for working on the life and writings of a queer German-Jewish convert to Islam. In Baer's analysis of Marcus's life, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe emerges as an important intellectual influence. The conclusion ends with the recent establishment of the queer-friendly Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque in Berlin. Through carefully interwoven chapters, we get a nuanced intellectual biography of a difficult life and challenging times with various personal contradictions and intellectual confluences. It thus provides an entry point for understanding more significant issues about Muslims, Jews, and queer life in German history.

Baer's book contributes to debates in various disciplines and fields of research, including connected German–Asian studies—mainly of the South Asian Ahmadiyya Muslim community or Ahmadis, who formed a modernist religious movement that established the first major mosque in Berlin. This review will engage with the book to explore the new direction it has opened up in the discipline of German–Asian history. How can scholars of global history maintain a comparative perspective as they negotiate the demands of transnational actors and multilingual archives? Moving beyond the polarized contemporary debate on Islam and Muslim migrants in Germany, the book offers a historical reading of Islam, conversion, and German subjectivity in the interwar years, which is valuable as the chosen case study is an interesting and complex one. Ahmadiyya Islam in Germany allows for a new reading not just of Ahmadis, but also of Islam: what one might call Weimar Islam in interwar Berlin. This expression of Islam maintained a dialogue with German debates on education, science, psychoanalysis, gender, and life reform (*Lebensreform*). This allows us to see Ahmadiyya Islam as the first significant movement within South Asian Islam to engage with Europe through a mosque and multilingual English and German publications in Britain and Germany.

While the book under review is a meticulous reading of Marcus's understanding and adaptation of Islam, the South Asian Ahmadis who were foundational to his views remain marginal. This might be because the focus remains on Hugo Marcus, even when the author documents his role in gay rights circles and the Muslim community in Berlin. This is a methodological problem that stems not so much from the question of archives as from the genres of global intellectual history and biography. The Ahmadiyya mosque in Berlin has slowly but steadily attracted academic attention, not least because it had some notable European converts, such as Marcus, Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss), and Omar Rolf von Ehrenfels. However, by focusing on European converts without paying attention to the Ahmadi actors who brought the knowledge which allowed the possibility of translation and adaptation and helped build dialogue between the two cultures and languages, Baer achieves only a partial understanding.

Moreover, presenting Ahmadiyya actors solely as religious missionaries is not very productive. Indeed, the imam and regular visitors

to the mosque were also university students and scholars pursuing various fields of knowledge, particularly science, economics, and philosophy. These actors included not just the mosque leaders Sadruddin and Abdullah, but also regular participants such as Syed Abid Husain, Zakir Husain, and K. Abdul Hamied, among many others. The Ahmadiyya mosque was intellectually connected with the German secular university and emerged as an important public arena for studying secularism and Islam in Germany. It was open to a range of scholars, including those who engaged with minority status and persecution. This may explain their openness to sexual minorities. In other words, thinking in terms of minorities instead of identity markers became a more productive way to understand the presence of a variety of political, religious, and sexual minorities. The Ahmadis understood the issue of persecution of Jews and homosexuals because they had themselves been confronted with persecution in the increasingly communalized and sectarian polity of British India. Here, some attention to the comparative dimension of South Asian history would have helped to contextualize and better understand Ahmadi politics in Europe.

The author does an admirable job of mapping the world of Hugo Marcus. However, Baer does not decentre or examine the complexities of Marcus's intellectual influences, instead confining himself to German intellectuals and knowledge formation. Apart from the works of Goethe, the remarkable and prolific writings of the influential Ahmadi writer and leader Muhammed Ali on questions of modernity, religion, and subjectivity are mentioned but not explored. The author reveals that the Ahmadis continued to support Marcus personally, despite many threats, even as German society and institutions were Nazified. Not only did they help Marcus escape from Germany to Switzerland, but they also made travel arrangements for his stay in British India. Unlike Omar Rolf von Ehrenfels, who moved to British India and worked with Ahmadis, Marcus made a different choice. He returned to Switzerland, where he relied on his Jewish and homosexual connections. Ahmadi friends continued to support him financially, emotionally, and intellectually, as is clear from the letters they exchanged. They also engaged critically with his translations and helped him develop his scholarly work on Islam and modernity.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Ahmadiyya Islam sought a new form of connection and affinity over difference. This made it appealing to many Germans, particularly Jewish converts to Islam. However, this sense of identification must be critically analysed. Queer conversion is an extremely interesting phenomenon and can be understood as an act of translation. Baer is one of the finest scholars on the issue of conversion, as is evident in this book. However, it seems to me that the case study reveals conversion not just as a religious act but as an intellectual and emotional translation. Marcus negotiated the meaning of what was available and what he desired personally. This brings us to questions of subjectivity and desire, both conscious and subconscious, and to the issue of conversion. It seems that Islam appeared as a queer religion, at least in the version understood by Marcus. This is an important point in the contemporary debates about Islam and homosexuality.

The book reveals fascinating facets of Marcus's life as a Jewish, Muslim, and gay German. Yet Marcus belonged to all and none of these categories. If anything, his life and death are a testament to the failure of compartmentalizing identity and intellectual history.

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