

BOOK REVIEW

German, Jew, Muslim, Gay: The Life and Times of Hugo Marcus. Marc David Baer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). Pp. 312. \$95.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9780231196710

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With *German, Jew, Muslim, Gay*, Marc David Baer has written the first biography of Hugo Marcus (1880–1966), who, as the title suggests, was a rather unusual historical figure. As a gay German Jew who converted to Islam and lived through the Holocaust, Marcus's life story does not correspond to the contemporary stereotypes of Jewishness and Muslimness that often pit Jews and Muslims against each other in what historian Maud Mandel has termed a “narrative of polarization.” In contrast, Baer's detailed biography, which draws on an impressively extensive range of archival sources, charts the trajectory of a unique 20th-century Jewish Muslim, or Muslim Jew, to provide his readers with “an example of the unexpected outcomes of the Muslim-Jewish encounter and a new aspect on Muslim experiences of the Holocaust” (1). As such, Baer's efforts to “queer Jewish and Islamic studies simultaneously” will be of great interest to scholars throughout the humanities and social sciences working on the intersection of Islam, Judaism, and queer studies.

Born in the imperial German city of Posen (today Poznań, Poland), Marcus moved to Berlin at the age of eighteen to study philosophy. Following his studies, Marcus was expected to join the family's wood finishing business started by his grandfather. A combination of factors led to a rather different path. His family lost its fortune in the aftermath of World War I, as factories in Posen, now in Poland, were nationalized. As a result, Marcus, armed with a doctorate in philosophy but without an academic post, began giving German language lessons to foreign students. It was in this capacity that he first encountered the Ahmadi community in Berlin in 1921. In a short space of time, Marcus would become the editor of the Ahmadi's German-language publications and play an important and very visible role in Berlin's Ahmadi community, which centered around Berlin's first mosque, completed by the Ahmadi in 1927. He converted to Islam in 1925, served as editor-in-chief of the Ahmadi journal *Moslemische Revue* from 1924 to 1940, and helped found the *Deutsch-Muslemische Gesellschaft*, which he chaired between 1930 and 1938. In addition, in 1939 Marcus completed a German translation of the Qur'an, together with extensive commentary.

Marcus was not only Muslim; he also was gay. As Baer reminds his readers, Marcus remains “the only figure to have played an important role in the gay rights movement and in establishing Islam in Germany” (1). While a student in Berlin, Marcus joined the world's first gay rights organization, the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* founded by the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. He also befriended another gay rights activist, Kurt Hiller. The two young men found an academic mentor in Georg Simmel (1858–1918), who “played a leading role in the left-wing, pacifist, feminist, and homosexual rights movements” of the day (2). Potentially guided by his cousin, the historian Ernst Kantorowicz (1895–1963), or Simmel, Marcus gravitated toward the *George-Kreis*, a group of artists and intellectuals centered around the influential symbolist poet Stefan George. The members of *George-Kreis* “thought of themselves as avant-gardes waging a cultural and spiritual war of redemption to renew Germany, and whose membership overlapped that of masculinist

homosexual circles” (2). Marcus’s interests in *Freundesliebe* or *Freundschaft* (both terms that Marcus, among others, used to refer to love between men) and “renewing” Germany were intertwined (85). A precocious intellectual, Marcus published a philosophical work, *Meditationen* (1904), at the age of twenty-four. *Meditationen*’s major themes included “love between men and boys; the master-disciple relationship; the ideal of male friendship; and a search for a new utopia” (31). These also are themes that Marcus explores in a range of philosophical and creative writings that spanned his entire life. In his first novella, *Das Frühlingsglück* (1900), a bildungsroman of sorts, Marcus tells the story of his fourteen-year-old protagonist, Guido Erhard, and his complicated, confused romantic and erotic feelings for a girl, Adeline, and a boy, Ernst. The novella, according to Baer, represents “an extended meditation on the superiority of homosexual to heterosexual relations” (26). In the novella, Adeline mentions to Guido that she had once considered converting to Judaism after reading about how the Jewish people “had longed to return to their beautiful, lost fatherland, which they loved like a far-away place.” She asks him whether he can “imagine a greater misfortune than such a love.” Underscoring his disillusion with heterosexual relations, Guido replies that “loving a beautiful young woman” would be a greater misfortune. To Marcus’s protagonist, heterosexuality is “as hopeless as pining for a lost homeland” (27). Marcus’s first novella, then, links the misfortune of heterosexual relations with the misfortune of Jews. In place of Judaism, Marcus seeks a utopia, “a new, exclusively social, non-democratic, non-revolutionary party, that unites all socially inclined members of all parties, of whatever leaning and belief, not in their aims, but in their means—a new, lay priest order devoted to the purpose of spreading a uniform world view and a truthful social doctrine” (36). Marcus’s utopia is decidedly neither revolutionary nor left-wing; it represents “a liberal, aristocratic utopianism” or, inspired by Simmel, an “aristocratic radicalism” (36). In Islam, with his Ahmadi coreligionists, Marcus believes to have found a utopia based on the principle of equality that “fights against all prejudices and barriers and demands equal opportunity for all,” but that is “run by an aristocratic elite” (88).

Marcus was not only a gay Muslim; he also was a German Jew who lived through the Holocaust. After the Nazi takeover of Germany, Berlin’s Muslim community experienced several changes. For the first time, articles expressing anti-Semitism were published in the *Moslemische Revue*. Some articles even claimed that “Islam and Nazism shared basic principles” (96). At the same time, German converts who were Nazi party members became increasingly visible and vocal within the community. The deputy imam of the Berlin Mosque, Shaykh Muhammad Abdullah, “spoke glowingly about the Nazi seizure of power and expressed goodwill toward the regime” (97). Despite Marcus’s conversion to Islam, his Jewishness would ultimately complicate his standing in Berlin’s Muslim community. Marcus had been the chairman of the German Muslim Society since its inception. In 1934, he was reelected, having received the highest number of votes. The runner-up, however, was a Nazi party member and convert named Hikmet Beyer. Only a single vote separated the two. Baer explains that whereas Marcus clearly retained the support of the society members, “there was a significant and increasing preference for converts who were party members” (97). The division among the society members was in large part generational. Like Marcus, the older members saw themselves as “German patriots and did not join the Nazi Party,” whereas the young members, like others of their generation, “were more likely to join the party and considered themselves nationalist revolutionaries” (97).

In Weimar Germany, the Ahmadi preached a message of tolerance and openness. In Nazi Germany, their adherence to their principles would be put to the test. Despite having been reelected chairman of the German Muslim Society, Marcus would soon resign “in order to save the Society from further troubles” amid the nazification of German society and the passing of anti-Semitic legislation (97). Even so, just a week after the Nuremberg Laws were enacted in September 1935, Marcus attended the society’s annual meeting, during which the board suggested that Marcus give two lectures at the mosque the following year. It is not clear whether Marcus ever gave those lectures, but it is notable that the

board proposed it despite the “laws separating Jews from Germans” (98). When the convert who Marcus chose to replace him as chairman suddenly passed away in September 1936, Hikmet Beyer, the Nazi convert who lost the 1934 election to Marcus by one vote, would finally become chairman of the German Muslim Society. Even so, in November 1937, Marcus would give a lecture at the mosque in which he implicitly drew parallels between Dalits in India who converted to Islam (“they were converted from being members of the lowest class of humans to becoming equals in the worldwide brotherhood of Islam”) and the situation of Jews in Germany. Baer suggests that “by referring to the untouchables of India to make his audience consider the fallen status of Jews,” Marcus may have been speaking directly to “the Nazi members of the congregation and the Gestapo spies among them to recognize that the brotherhood of Islam pays no heed to race” (101). Yet, between Beyer and Shaykh Muhammad Abdullah, the nature of the German Muslim Society and the Berlin Mosque had undeniably changed. The *Moslemische Revue* also consistently published articles that praised the Nazi regime and highlighted the compatibility of Nazi ideology and Islam.

During the November 1938 pogrom, Marcus became one of the 30,000 Jews in Germany and Austria to be deported to a concentration camp. Marcus would spend ten days in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Most Jews arrested during and shortly after the November pogrom were released by spring 1939, if they survived. After the war, Marcus noted that “on the day of their release, former detainees were urged to leave Germany post-haste, because otherwise they would disappear forever in a concentration camp” (105). Facing this prospect, Marcus turned to Imam Abdullah for help. Despite Abdullah’s public overtures to the Nazi regime, the imam quickly worked on a plan to secure Marcus’s exit from Germany, eventually obtaining a visa for India. Marcus would arrive in Switzerland in 1939. At the time, the Swiss only accepted migrants who possessed “visas for onward migration” (116). Armed with a visa for British India, Marcus was expected to soon leave Switzerland. However, following Germany’s invasion of Poland, the British canceled Marcus’s visa, leaving him entirely “dependent on the good will of Swiss authorities” (118). Many Jews were refused entry into Switzerland and turned back to Germany or France to face near certain death. Among those who were allowed in, most were interned. In this context, Marcus was lucky. He would remain in Switzerland until his death in 1966. Baer suggests that Marcus never went back to Germany after the war because of the continued persecution of gay people under Paragraph 175 of the German penal code. But perhaps Marcus also was not keen on returning to a country that had exterminated Jews, including members of his own family, and that forced him to leave his home because of his origins.

Hugo Marcus was a unique individual. He was gay, German, Jewish, and Muslim and, most importantly, each part of his identity influenced the others. For example, the fact that he was gay and Jewish influenced his understanding and practice of Islam. Imagining Goethe to be a gay Muslim like himself, Marcus did not see Islam as a foreign, Eastern religion, but as the perfect German religion—rational and tolerant. For Marcus, the very spirit of German thought was already influenced by Islam. As Baer explains, Marcus drew a straight line from Muhammad’s era to Arab Spain to Spinoza to Goethe to Bismarck. Marcus contrasted his Islamic vision of rationality and tolerance with the irrationality and intolerance of Christian Europe toward Jews and other racialized peoples in Europe and in the colonies. Perhaps today some might call Marcus’s outlook intersectional. Baer borrows a term, monopluralism, that Marcus coined to make sense of his intersecting German, gay, Jewish, and Muslim identities. By monopluralism, Marcus meant to combine monism (“the idea that all life is part of one basic element in the world”) and pluralism (“the idea that there are many basic elements in the world”) to argue that “all things in the world are united through the interaction of unity and multiplicity” (60). Rather than believing that all things in the world “were different manifestations of a single basic element,” Marcus believed in the “unity of multiplicity” (61). Baer notes that this description, the unity of multiplicity, “serves as an accurate description of a man who over the course of eighty-six years lived as a

German and a Jew, a man who loved men and fought for the right to do so, a man who took the unusual path to become a Muslim” (61). Perhaps the only shortcoming of this biography is that Baer does not fully explore Marcus’s concept of monopluralism and the unity of multiplicity in relation to his lived experiences and identities. Nevertheless, Baer has written an exemplary biography of a unique individual whose life story helps us reach beyond the dominant frameworks for thinking about Jewish-Muslim relations in the past, present, and future. Rather than visualizing “Jews and Muslims crossing imaginary boundaries,” Marcus’s lifelong commitment to his Jewishness, Muslimness, and queerness provides us with a way to conceptualize “Jewish-Muslim relations from within” (11). In other words, Baer’s biography of Marcus queers not only Islamic and Jewish studies, but also the concept of Jewish-Muslim relations.