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# Devil and Infidel: Representations of Adolf Hitler in the Egyptian Public Sphere, 1938-1945

Israel Gershoni

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## **Abstract**

In his lecture, Prof. Gershoni pointed out that the image of Hitler was commonly illuminated and discussed in the Egyptian public sphere both prior to and throughout the Second World War. Intellectuals, politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, members of the professions and even segments of the illiterate population were among those who delved into the image of Hitler and Nazism. In this context, Gershoni focused on three major intellectual voices in Egypt during this era: Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987); ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad (1889-1964); and Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat (1885-1968). Each construed a variety of images and representations of Hitler and Nazism. Gershoni selected them for discussion not because they necessarily represented the intellectual stratum, but because their writing, and particularly their journalistic output, was representative of broad sectors of the literate society and the public arena. Using a variety of genres, such as journalistic drama and sketches (Hakim), a biography of Hitler (‘Aqqad), and editorials and essays in the press (Zayyat), and by appealing to Muslims, Christians and Jews from the elite and non-elite communities of readers, these three intellectuals represented a mainstream voice of Egypt during the period under discussion. Historians who are interested in the Egyptians’ perception of Hitler and Nazism at the time can readily see that mainstream intellectuals and middle class voices in Egypt’s public sphere developed profoundly negative attitudes and positions towards the German dictator. In contrast to the widely held perception, shared by many historians and observers, that the Egyptian public tended to develop pro-German sentiments, Gershoni’s findings show that important public intellectuals were anti-Fascist, and anti-Nazi and anti-Hitlerian in particular.

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## **Devil and Infidel: Representations of Adolf Hitler in the Egyptian Public Sphere, 1938-1945\***

Israel Gershoni

Images and representations of Adolf Hitler were widespread in the Egyptian public sphere both prior to and throughout the Second World War. As I have tried to demonstrate in other places, these representations were mainly negative, even repulsive and demonizing. Certainly, they overshadowed some peripheral public images that were more sympathetic to the Nazi cause. Thus, in contrast to a commonly held view in Middle Eastern studies, which tends to emphasize Arab sympathy for Nazi Germany and Hitler (“the enemy of my enemy is my ally/friend”), in the reality of contemporary Egypt, Hitler and Nazi Germany were perceived as enemies rather than allies or “friends.” Moreover, in the rich repertoire of images portraying Hitler, the Führer was depicted as “a devil,” “an infidel,” and a warmonger, thereby presenting a substantial threat not only to Europe and the world at large, but also specifically to the Arab Middle East. In the landscape of the Egyptian literati, it was first and foremost intellectuals and journalists who created this negative image of Hitler in the political echelon, politicians, ministers, party leaders, and members of parliament also participated in the portrayal of Hitler in a similar light. In addition, students, bureaucrats, technocrats, professionals, and other representatives of the urban educated Middle class (the *effendiyya*), and even segments of the illiterate population, all depicted negative images of Hitler and Nazism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Israel Gershoni, *Light in the Shade: Egypt and Fascism, 1922-1937* (Tel Aviv, 1999); Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt: Dictatorship versus Democracy in the 1930s* (Stanford, 2010); Israel Gershoni, *Dame and Devil: Egypt and Nazism, 1935-1940*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv, 2012).

In the following article, I will focus on three major public intellectual voices in Egypt during this era: Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987); ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad (1889-1964); and Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat (1885-1968). All of them provide us with a variety of images and representations of Hitler and Nazism. I selected them not because they necessarily reflect the intellectual stratum, but because in their writings, particularly their journalistic productions and popular texts, they represented the broader sectors of literate society within the larger public arena. By using a variety of genres, such as journalistic drama and sketches (Hakim), a biography of Hitler (‘Aqqad), and editorials as well as other essays in the press (Zayyat), and by appealing to Muslims, Christians, and Jews, from both the elite and the non-elite Egyptian and Arab communities of readers, these three intellectuals represented a mainstream voice of Egypt during the period under discussion.

We will start with Tawfiq al-Hakim’s attitude towards Nazi Germany and Hitler and, to some degree, towards Mussolini and Fascism. During the years 1938-1945, Hakim published a series of artistic works in which he portrayed Hitler (and more generally fascism and Nazism) in the most negative and demonic light.<sup>2</sup> One of his significant collections of essays and playlets on the subject was *Sultan al-Zalam*, “The Reign of Darkness,” which was published in Cairo in 1941, in the midst of a war that had already spilled over into Egypt. The text is a philosophical essay plus three sections of drama, published with the war raging nearby in mind.<sup>3</sup> Hakim felt that a Nazi-fascist victory would extinguish not only democratic forces but, ultimately, all of humanity. After learning of the Nazi atrocities, reported by the press and by published intelligence sources, and assuming that Nazi Germany would emerge victorious, Hakim was plunged into an apocalyptic mood, lamenting in 1941 that

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the following artistic and journalistic works by Hakim: *Tahta Shams al-Fikr* (Cairo, 1938; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1941); *Praksa aw Mushkilat al-Hukm* (Cairo, 1939); *Ahd al-Shaytan* (Cairo 1938; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1942); *Min al-Burj al-‘Aji* (Cairo, 1941); *Tahta al-Misbah al-Akhdar* (Cairo, 1941; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1942); *Shajarat al-Hukm* (Cairo, 1945). For a more systematic examination of Hakim’s attitudes towards Hitler and Mussolini, Nazism and Fascism, see Israel Gershoni, “Confronting Nazism in Egypt: Tawfiq al-Hakim’s anti-Totalitarianism, 1938-1945,” *Tel Aviver Jarbuch für Deutsche Geschichte* 26 (1997), pp. 121-150.

<sup>3</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Sultan al-Zalam* (Cairo, 1941).

civilization “is not so entrenched in us as we had imagined.” “The dusk descending on man fills me with dread,” he wrote, “... humanity will return to primitive and barbarian ways.”

For Hakim, civilization itself was in danger and the cultural evolution that had begun in Egypt thousands of years before, continuing in Greece, Rome, then Renaissance Italy, France’s enlightenment and culminating in transnational modernism, was on the verge of termination. Viewing himself as a “soldier in the service of this human civilization,” Hakim sensed that his cause was close to defeat, since his profound belief in the inexorability of progress seemed seriously flawed. A new principle was rising in its stead, “the new law of brute force and the right of the mighty to crush and destroy others and lord it over the planet.” Disabused of the notion of a linearly evolving civilization, Hakim considered that the momentum of humanism, scientific discovery, cultural progress, and political liberation would cease as surely as “bombs have been dropping on museums and libraries,” and “scientists and intellectuals like Einstein, Freud, and Thomas Mann have been forced into exile.” Hakim dreaded his own vision of a collective “return to barbarism... tribalism, and beastliness.” He saw evidence of this in the Nazis’ efforts to eradicate monotheistic religions, which to him represented divine mercy, in stark contrast with the police states in which fascist governments imprisoned whole populations.<sup>4</sup>

Such contemporary attitudes sharply contradict Anwar al-Sadat’s retrospective proclamation that “1941 was a year of hope for Egypt.”<sup>5</sup> It can hardly be argued that Sadat had his finger on the pulse of the nation while Hakim was disconnected from the broader sectors of his society and lived in a remote ivory tower. Hakim was, in fact, the most popular writer in Egypt in that period and none of his intellectual peers sold as many books as he did. His works were often published and then re-issued, as the tens of thousands of volumes were eagerly consumed by the Egyptian public, and by Arabs in general. Egyptian youth, in particular, including the Free Officers themselves, acclaimed Hakim.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-47.

<sup>5</sup> Anwar El Sadat, *Revolt on the Nile* (London, 1957), pp. 34, and more broadly, pp. 26-57.



Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir, who established himself as the *ra'is* of the July revolution and the new Egyptian republic, recounted that Hakim's writings were a source of inspiration for him (although Hakim's democratic themes do not seem to have made a lasting impression).<sup>6</sup>

Hakim alleged that the most serious crime committed by the fascist regimes was their campaign against truth. This crusade manifested itself in the persecution of intellectuals and philosophers, the "pursuers of freedom" who were labelled sworn enemies of the totalitarian police state. The pursuit of truth, whether it be science or philosophy, was incompatible with ultranationalism because "nationalism is collective egoism and egoism is by its very nature blind and irrational, while science is the pure study of truth." For these reasons, Hakim believed that the intellectuals had become "a serious threat to the peoples' tamers/jailers." He defined the fascist leaders, Mussolini and Hitler, as "jailers" and "tamers" who totally subdued their people in accordance with their whims and ambitions. He describes the situation in detail:

The leaders/peoples' tamers detest the learned philosophers who are capable of engaging in objective free study and liberal thought and are committed to the principle of science for the sake of science or science for the sake of the whole of humankind. The leaders/peoples' tamers believe that the philosophers have no right to exist unless they submit totally to the principle of science for the sake of the homeland, namely science in the service of the army and militarism and subservient to the authority of race and blood.<sup>7</sup>

Though he feared for the fate of civilization, Hakim maintained a glimmer of cautious optimism, characteristic of his refusal to concede to anxiety and fear. His worries did not leave him stupefied or impotent, but rather strengthened his resolve to combat the "reign of darkness." He saw this conflict as one in which those with material power, the fascist forces,

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<sup>6</sup> See, in detail, Israel Gershoni, "An Intellectual Source for the Revolution: Tawfiq al-Hakim's Influence on Nasser and His Generation," in Shimon Shamir (ed.), *Egypt from Monarchy to Republic: A Reassessment of Revolution and Change* (Boulder, 1995), pp. 212-249.

<sup>7</sup> Hakim, *Sultan al-Zalam*, pp. 36, 34-39.

were conducting an assault on the ranks of the spiritual forces, or enlightened humanity. He depicts the end result of this conflict as the victory of light over darkness, and calls for intellectuals in Egypt and the Arab world to unite behind their liberal counterparts in Europe “in the common struggle to defend liberty against dictatorship.” He deemed this “a life and death struggle.”<sup>8</sup>

Later, in his wartime writings, Hakim, particularly in *Himari Qala Li*, “My Donkey Told Me,” continued to wage a fierce campaign against Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, and Nazism. *Himari Qala Li* was first published during the war years as a series of dramatic sketches in the most popular dailies in Egypt. Eventually, it was published as a collection of articles in Cairo in 1945. Hakim made no secret of his allegiance to the Allied cause as well as his antipathy toward the opposing side, Hitler and fascism. He portrayed Hitler as a devil whose stated aim was to destroy the world and to bring an end to civilization. He accused Hitler of propagating a cult of the Aryan race that included the objective of conquering and enslaving the other races of the world. Hakim viewed him as a militarist and warmonger whose vision of the ideal world was absolute German domination and the subjugation of all other nations and cultures. However, for Hakim, Hitler was also a pre-monotheistic *jahili* infidel who stood in stark contrast to the prophets that had tried to extricate themselves from specific races or cultures in order to appeal to all of humanity. Hitler worshipped one blood, one land, one race; thus, Hakim concluded that unlike the immortal tidings of the monotheistic prophets, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, Hitler’s career was doomed to failure because all of humanity would not stand for his diabolical plans.<sup>9</sup>

In this dramatic sketch of Hitler’s “monumental failure,” Hakim explores links between the Führer’s personality, the temperament of the Germanic *Volk*, and their shattering defeat. Indeed, in this later period of the war, it appeared to Hakim as though Hitler and Nazism were on the path to meeting their demise. Hakim places Hitler on trial, and concludes that Hitler is responsible for his own downfall—his critical mistake was

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 50, 57; also, more generally, see pp. 38-57.

<sup>9</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Himari Qala Li* (Cairo, 1945), pp. 9-15, 26-58.

his assumption that brute force would overpower truth. Prophets, scientists, and great artists have also attempted to bring about world-historical change, but they relied on scientific or moral truth to do so. Though claiming a somewhat prophetic status for himself, Hitler attacked God and religion; while trying to enlist art and science into his ranks, he banished many artists and scientists. Prophets pointed to the deficiencies in their societies and suggested a means for improvement in an effort to spread a message that transcended time and nationalistic or ethnic chauvinist boundaries. For this they were persecuted, and sometimes martyred, but their message was delivered and ultimately triumphed. Hitler exemplified precisely the opposite traits in his readiness to wage war in order to further his chauvinist racist agenda. He rebelled against neither his time nor place, but rather aspired to satisfy his society's most worldly urges. Several months before Hitler's suicide, Hakim predicted that the fate of anyone who acts obsessively on furthering his "supreme" national race while despising and annihilating other "inferior races" is death. Hakim thus concluded that, unlike the immortal tidings and prestige of the prophets, Hitler's career was doomed to obscurity, just as all the physical ruin he had left behind him would be rebuilt.<sup>10</sup>

"After the possible victory over the reign of darkness," Hakim anticipated the need for a global de-Nazification program. Since few remained untraumatized by the campaign waged by evil, he predicted that people would have to re-learn how to be productive, creative, and happy. Moreover, "the first step on the road to revival after the reign of darkness will be the permanent liquidation of the desire of the strong to use force to rule the weak." In his mind, socialist democracy, complete with a constitution and a parliament, strikes an ideal balance between the appetite for freedom and the social restraints necessary for justice and equality. Though a true socialist democracy had never been established, and thus its feasibility was uncertain, he nevertheless was adamant that post-war man was a new creature, in need of new social and political arrangements, and he hoped that the decline of the "reign of darkness" would be followed by the "era of light": the salvation of mankind from the ravages of war and tyranny through the establishment of a new brand

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<sup>10</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakim, "Himari wa-Hitlar," in *ibid.*, pp. 26-39.

of democratic order—more humane, more socialistic, and more universal. Intellectuals would be tasked with disseminating and institutionalizing socialist democracy. This is the final piece of evidence demonstrating the democratic commitment of Egypt’s intellectuals: Hakim could not have deemed them suitable for this role had they not shared his passionate anti-totalitarian views.<sup>11</sup>

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‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad used the genre of popular biography as a means to attack Hitler. His major work on the subject, *Hitlar fi al-Mizan*, “Hitler in the Balance”, was a detailed biography of the life of the Führer with special emphasis on the war. It was published in Cairo in early June 1940, when Hitler was at the height of his career and poised to win the war. ‘Aqqad described what he viewed as Hitler’s crimes against humanity. He analyzed Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and demonstrated the application of the theory of race and racial practices in Nazi Germany during the 1930s. According to ‘Aqqad, the Führer’s commitment to racial persecution and purification eventually led him to develop industries of mass annihilation, the most prominent of which was the Jewish genocide. ‘Aqqad warned the Egyptians, as well as the Arabs in general, not to be captivated by the false concept of the Nazis as being a friendly force just because they were “the enemy of my enemy;” the Nazis should not be seen as liberators from the British and French imperial yokes. ‘Aqqad viewed that as a myth which the Arabs would be wise to ignore, because only the Allied powers, by defeating Nazism and fascism, could give the Arabs the independence and liberation that they desired.<sup>12</sup>

More specifically, for ‘Aqqad, an account of the German context which led to Hitler’s rise to power and a description of the Nazification policies he pursued once in office did not provide a complete answer to the riddle of Adolf Hitler. An understanding of the Führer’s psychological profile was also indispensable to penetrate “the essence of Hitler.” Thus, an entire section of *Hitler in the Balance* was devoted to an

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<sup>11</sup> Hakim, *Sultan al-Zalam*, pp. 58-69.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad, *Hitlar fi al-Mizan* (Cairo, 1940).

extensive quasi-Freudian analysis of what 'Aqqad termed "Hitler's psyche."

'Aqqad's biographical account found a definite link between Hitler's family, youth, and upbringing, and the patterns of behavior he subsequently manifested as an adult. For 'Aqqad, much of Hitler's distorted personality was attributable to growing up in a broken family. Hitler's father Alois Schicklgruber (later Hitler), himself an illegitimate child, was nearly 50 when he married Adolph's mother, Klara. Pampered by a loving but weak mother, the young Adolf suffered from the tyranny of a rigid and authoritative father. The instability of his father's marital life (Klara was his third wife), his repeated moves from town to town, and his restlessness and lack of stability and confidence, were all projected onto his son and were manifested in the boy's frequent agitation and the insomnia for which he had to take medication. Alois's death when Adolf was 12 (sic; in reality, he was 13) only exacerbated the fragile boy's psychological distress. Thus, "Hitler experienced a nasty youth, devoid of the warmth and closeness of family members or close friends." Adolf's poor performance in primary and secondary school was partially attributable to the stress occasioned by his family circumstances. His mother's death when Hitler was 18 left Adolf a penniless orphan forced to fend for himself by working at odd jobs. He was a lonely and impoverished young man "without the ability to earn a living," yet he maintained an inflated self-image ("Hitler believed he was Michelangelo's successor in the field of architecture"). Hitler's early manhood was one of desperate attempts and repeated failures to become the artist "which he believed that by his nature he deserved to be."

'Aqqad's description of Hitler's broken youth and early disappointments and frustrations formed the basis for his psychological profile of the adult Hitler. One indication of Hitler's abnormal personality was his "strange, enigmatic attitude towards women." Due to his father's negative influence, which inhibited his ability to express love for the opposite sex, Hitler never married or entered into a deep relationship with a woman. Rather, all of his emotional energy was channeled into "the National Socialist movement and the German nation." Hitler "invested his soul" in the nation, which served as the

compensatory replacement for the wife he never had. Unable to establish intimate and reciprocal personal relationships with others, Hitler totally lacked the positive traits of empathy, compassion, and forgiveness; in their place, the negative characteristics of hostility, aggression, and vengeance toward others manifested.

Another manifestation of Hitler's unique personality was his love of animals, which exceeded the love he demonstrated for humans. Hitler's loyalty to his dog, a large and menacing "watch dog," "is further proof of his self-love (not love for others) and his isolation from other members of the German race." He compensated for his inability to communicate with humans by communicating with animals. Hitler's affection for animals was an indication of his "emotional poverty," an effort to compensate for the warmth and love he had missed in his childhood. In reality, Hitler's "love of dogs and birds derives only from the devilish insinuations of hysteria (*wasawis al-histariya*), from the obstructive mechanisms of egocentrism (*'awarid al-ananiyya*), and the lack of a balanced psychological structure."

Another side of Hitler's distorted personality was his total inability to tell the truth. Hitler was a natural and compulsive liar. In some cases, his lies were so much a part of him that he did not know that they were lies. His political performance was based on lies and deception, including self-deception. "In Hitler's case, a lie is not akin to drinking a hated medicine, but rather like consuming a tasty beverage imbibed in one gulp to quench [one's] thirst." Hitler's self-deception was paralleled by his fundamental difficulty in distinguishing between fact and fantasy. Hitler's world was one of false realities that he had himself created and through which he understood the world in a distorted fashion. He was a man who looked upon the world and acted within it as if it consisted of "fantastic, bewitched castles and the turrets of legends and fairy tales." Thus, Hitler deceived both himself and Germany when he promised his people "control over the whole world." The reality of this vision of the future existed only in the Führer's feverish imagination.

'Aqqad maintained that Hitler's warped character traits were signs of chronic mental illness. Hitler was "sick," a man suffering from

schizophrenia, paranoia, hysteria, and hysterical panic, all a direct result of the conditions of his childhood and the complex relationship between him and his parents. ‘Aqqad based his clinical diagnosis on psychological studies of Hitler’s personality, including the findings and views of German psychiatrists who had examined him when he was in prison in the mid-1920s. As ‘Aqqad described it, Hitler’s schizophrenia took the form of “two contradictory personalities,” which switched back and forth in his thoughts and actions. Hitler was sometimes logical, sometimes irrational; sometimes sensible, sometimes foolish; sometimes decisive, sometimes hesitant. On some occasions he acted responsibly, on others rashly. His schizophrenia was intensified by frequent attacks of hysteria that indicated profound internal anxiety, produced by an unbalanced personality suffering from a fundamental lack of confidence. Hitler’s hysterical outbursts took the form of uncontrollable agitation and wild screaming at others, both stemming from his obsessive focus on the self and his preoccupation with his own cravings. For ‘Aqqad, these episodes of hysteria were the most striking indication of Hitler’s sick personality.<sup>13</sup>

On the somewhat naïve assumption that he had succeeded in deciphering the riddle of Hitler and Nazi Germany, in the later chapters of *Hitler in the Balance* ‘Aqqad moved to discussing the present war and its potential implications for Europe, the Arabs, and Egypt. As a politically involved public intellectual and member of the Sa‘dist Party, a political party whose leadership was soon to argue in favor of Egyptian entry into the war on the Allied side, his position on the war was vehemently pro-Allies and anti-Axis. “The issue today is the war,” ‘Aqqad declared; in his view, it was a war “between tyranny and human liberty, or between faith in the power of weapons alone versus faith in a life and civilization beyond weapons and devoid of weapons.” What “Hitlerism” wanted in the war was “world domination” (*al-saytara al-‘alamiyya*), the subjugation of other nations and their total submission to German hegemony. The Nazi war aim was a simple one: “to take everything from everyone and not to give anything to anyone.” ‘Aqqad repeatedly warned his readers that Nazi Germany’s victory in the war

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-147.

would mean “the victory of power and the rule of power” and the creation of a “new world order,” bringing about “the enslavement and exploitation of all other [non-German] peoples and the plundering of all they have.” The victory of Hitlerism, with its cult of leadership and submission to the Führer, would bear with it the extinction of human liberty: “Freedom will have no existence in a world ruled by an infallible holy man who demands of men what even God the Creator has never demanded of them.”<sup>14</sup>

For people everywhere, the choice in the present war was one between two diametrically opposed paths for the future. One was “the Nazi path,” which, for ‘Aqqad, was “the path of faith in bestial power” (*al-quwwa al-haywaniyya*), the entrenchment and perpetuation of “the rule of the strong in the world.” The other option was “the path of democracy: faith in a life of constitutionalism which is not a bestial constitutionalism, but one of justice, integrity, unbiased fairness, and hope for human progression to a system of norms and laws that will shape the actions of individuals and nations above and beyond the law of the cave and the jungle.” Winston Churchill could hardly have phrased the choice facing the world in June, 1940 in more stentorian terms:

The issue facing the world is the defeat of Germany and the victory of the democratic states . . . . The problem of humanity today is to strike an overwhelming blow at Hitlerian Germany, after which it will have no existence. . . . Germany must emerge [from the war] defeated and devoid of any ability to threaten or endanger . . . . Any result that is less than final and total defeat for Germany will not suffice, and any result that is less than absolute victory for democracy will be unsatisfactory.<sup>15</sup>

As he had in his earlier commentaries and would continue in later ones, ‘Aqqad affirmed his complete faith in freedom, democracy, and the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 149-223; also see pp. 3-74.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-161, 163.



“inevitable” victory of the Allies. He vehemently took issue with those who argued that democracy had failed historically and that it was incapable of coping with the complex problems of industrial society and mass politics. “Democracy has not failed nor can it fail,” he stated emphatically. In the modern world, there was no viable alternative to a democratically based order: It was the only social and political path for a progressive enlightened society. Because democracy was the sole basis for human progress, its eventual triumph was assured: “Democracy will not fail but rather will advance and prosper.”<sup>16</sup>

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Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat was the editor of one of the most popular cultural weeklies of the time, *al-Risala*. As such, his anti-Nazi and anti-fascist views, expressed from 1933 until 1945, reflected a broader public sentiment. In those years, he and other contributors to *al-Risala* leveled profound and systematic criticisms against Mussolini and Fascist Italy, particularly regarding the brutal conquest of Ethiopia (Abyssinia), and its occupation and annexation by Italy. Simultaneously, *al-Risala* attacked Nazi racism and Hitler’s ambition to conquer a *lebensraum* in order to expand the “space of the German race.”<sup>17</sup> However, with the outbreak of the Second World War and Zayyat’s clear awareness that the responsibility for this was Hitler’s, he escalated his personal attacks on the Führer. He now presented him as a deadly combination of “infidel,” “evil,” and “demon,” whose total aim was the annihilation of enlightened man and society.<sup>18</sup>

About a month after the outbreak of the Second World War, Zayyat published a major essay, “The Crime of Nazism against Humanity.”<sup>19</sup> The title of the article speaks for itself. Zayyat’s opening words reflect his shock and profound distress with the outbreak of war.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-193.

<sup>17</sup> Gershoni, *Light in the Shade*, pp. 299-329; idem, “Egyptian Liberalism in an Age of ‘Crisis of Orientation’: *al-Risala*’s Reaction to Fascism and Nazism, 1933-1939,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999), pp. 551-576.

<sup>18</sup> Gershoni, *Dame and Devil*, vol. 2, pp. 157-227.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat, “Jarirat al-Naziyya ‘ala al-Insaniyya,” *al-Risala*, 9 October 1939, pp. 1927-1928.

Although Zayyat and *al-Risala* had predicted the possibility of this outcome during the previous years, 1937-1939, there had been hope that international intervention would manage to prevent such a war. Zayyat was devastated, as he clearly understood the monstrous nature of what the war involved, and that it would bring unprecedented death and destruction to mankind. He begins his editorial by stating, “Oh, what a distortion of reason! Oh, what a perplexity of logic! Today, human history is confronted with a horrific and overwhelming earthquake that man has never seen since God’s creation of earth.” In his neoclassical style, Zayyat employs the sharpest language, at times apocalyptic, to blame Hitlerian Nazism (*al-naziyya al-Hitlariyya*) exclusively for the outbreak of the war and its horrific results.

Zayyat admits that human reason remains powerless and inadequate in comprehending how mankind was led into such a horrendous war. The Nazis have conquered the great German nation, which brought humanity the finest intellectual works in science, philosophy, literature, and art. Zayyat wrote, “The Nazis silenced the thoughts of the German people, eradicated the people’s will, recreated it as a mob of elephants of hell (*afyal jahannam*), who aspire to conquer the whole world – the military forces as well as civil populations – either by totally destroying them or by planting terror and hunger!” One could be more empathetic to “Hitlerian Nazism,” if it was possible to find in its “authoritative dictatorship” even “one good principle or one positive school of thought”; this might excuse “the total enslavement of the German people to Nazism, which brings chaos to humankind.” However, Nazism is a “gross deviation of chauvinism and racism, of ethnocentrism and hubris.” Zayyat was amazed by the follies of history. How could the enlightened German nation be reduced to a barbaric crowd of warriors, and even more troubling, how could Europe and the enlightened world let such a demonic phenomenon flourish and be dragged into such an all-encompassing war?

Zayyat viewed Nazism as a demonic power waging total war against two major cultural traditions that enlightened mankind had created, namely, war against the monotheistic religious traditions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and war against secular human

civilization, as it was reshaped in the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and particularly during the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. (Zayyat and *al-Risala* included the Arab *nahda* in these secular trends.)

Zayyat vehemently rejected Hitler's theory of race as it was conceptually outlined in *Mein Kampf*, and as it was implemented in Germany through race laws and regulations in the 1930s. Appealing to broad communities of readers, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, Zayyat employed macabre parody as a literary device to transmit his message. He attacked Hitler and *Mein Kampf* by presenting Hitler as a self-proclaimed prophet and *Mein Kampf* as a holy book. In his sarcastic analogy, Hitler assumed that his book descended to him/mankind from the heavens, "thus, it is *shari'a* that invalidated all other holy books except for *Mein Kampf*; it erased all ruling authorities except Nazi rule, and obliterated all races other than the German [Aryan] race." In this macabre construction, Hitler is an apostle (*rasul*) and *Mein Kampf* is a message (*risala*), a new *shari'a* brought from heaven to the "new chosen people," the German Aryan race. In Hitler's racist doctrine, the Semitic race "is the scum of the human race (*huthalat al-Nas*)." For Hitler, the religious messages of the Semites are inferior, and indeed invalid, compared to the Sealed Message of superiority that the Aryans brought to the world. "How can the Semites not be inferior to the Aryans? For they [the Aryans] are the epitome of the races and their revelation and apostle are superior to anything in the world?"

Zayyat used this literary strategy to reject all the racist theories and concepts in *Mein Kampf*, as well as the racist policies of the Nazi regime. Hitler is a false prophet, and his book is not the *shari'a*, but a demonic message of brutal inhumane racism. In contrast, Zayyat reasserted the distinctiveness of the universal messages, which the "so-called Semites" brought to the world through "Moses and Judaism, Jesus and Christianity, and Muhammad and Islam." The three Semitic monotheistic religions, he reminded the Führer, introduced the world to new laws and norms for human behavior. They brought messages of humanism, compassion, and love, and thereby eased human adversity and predicaments. In particular, they created universal equality and the

right of living for all races, “no race is superior to another, no race may oppress another, and no nation shall commit injustice towards another.” In other words, for Zayyat, the Semitic universal messages prove the complete falsity and hollow deception of *Mein Kampf*. Zayyat adds, “Who is a German deity who purifies the Aryans? [Four heroes,] Hitler, Goerring, Hess, and Ribbentrop, exterminating the world’s nations, crushing human civilization, and annihilating all the brilliant achievements of mankind.” They undermine both God’s law and secular enlightened human conscience and seek to replace them with a totalitarian political order “that does not honor agreements, disregards treaties, and has neither laws nor principles.” Scorning this presumption, Zayyat asked rhetorically: Is this Hitler’s superior pure Aryan race? In his poetics of evil, Zayyat defined Nazi racism, brutal redemptive anti-Semitism, as the “Nazi doctrine, which humiliates human races, denies the natural rights of peoples, disregards laws and norms,” and aims only to rule by power, deception, manipulation, corruption, and trickery while totally rejecting all other worldviews.

Reasserting his pre-war arguments, Zayyat presented Hitler as an international provocateur and manipulator, obsessed with undermining the international order that emerged after the Great War. Zayyat challenged Hitler by asking what Luther, Kant, Goethe, Beethoven, and “their enlightened German descendants” would say about the Führer’s conduct. How would they respond to the tyrant, “the same frustrated artist (Hitler was an amateur painter), who lies in the name of the German state, signs agreements on behalf of its nation’s honor and then disregards them, and turns his nation of hardworking people into a demonic enemy of peace, who instills terror in every heart, and sows misery in every home?” How would the great forefathers of the German nation regard Hitler, who, after ardently opposing communism as the most loathsome doctrine and notorious regime, “he lets the swastika slowly but surely be squashed between the hammer of communism and its sickle.” (Zayyat vehemently attacked the non-aggression pact agreed between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany in late August 1939, known as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.) *Al-Risala*’s contributors, similarly to many other Egyptian papers and magazines, were convinced that Hitler’s

aim in provoking the war was to establish the “new world order” (*al-nizam al-‘alami al-jadid*), the Nazi order.

Zayyat firmly rejected Nazi dictatorship (*al-tughyan al-nazi*). He reiterated that the Nazi regime repressed all civil rights and liberties, silenced all opposition, barred the press, and turned Germany into a police state. Reminding the reader of his positive assessment of Hitler’s domestic performance, just a few months before, he conceded his grave mistake. Zayyat took the trouble to quote the paragraphs in which he erred in his praise for Hitler’s leadership abilities in an early May edition of *al-Risala* (1 May, 1939). He recounted that at that time, “I did not expect that God would strike Hitler with the lowest human defect – with a most devastating form of rapid extermination. His head is taken by hubris, his soul is full of obstinacy to the point that his passions are limitless and his whims are unstoppable.” By the same token, Zayyat emphasizes that Hitler, who was initially admired by the youth of many nations of the world, is now viewed as a “warmonger” whose aim is to drag the world into the “blaze of war.”

Zayyat returns to one of his central themes: the real victims of the war that Hitler imposed on the world are “the small peoples (*al-shu‘ub al-saghira*),” including Egypt and the Arab peoples. The Nazi dictatorship “aims at controlling the world based on enslaving the weak, exploiting all natural and human resources for a single-race rule and the will of one dictator.” He emphasized that the only guarantee for the continued existence of these nations is a stable international order, a strong League of Nations, “honor, justice, and peace among nations.”

Having ardently rejecting Nazism, Zayyat reasserted human freedom, liberal democracy, religious, racial, and ethnic tolerance, and a multi-party pluralistic parliamentary government. For him, the traditional-religious and modern-secular legacies which brought culture, moral values, and social and political order to mankind can “only be safeguarded and sustained by the free democratic powers.” Therefore, “the small nations cannot live in liberty except through active participation in the unyielding and committed defense of democracy.” Accepting reality, Zayyat adopted a pragmatic approach according to

which the “only guarantee for the survival of the minority within the majority, of the weak under the wings of the strong, is anchored in the social virtues which first emerged in the monotheistic religions and were then developed and refined in the shelter of democracy.” Nevertheless, Zayyat apocalyptically warned, “if heaven forbid,” the totalitarian dictatorship should prevail, “human rights will be trampled and human brotherhood will be replaced by one-race ethnocentrism. Rather than equality among nations, a single nation will control the world, and a single dictator will suppress human liberty, we will witness a new world conquered by evil, and we do not want to live in such a world!”

Zayyat’s conclusion is clear-cut: death is preferable to living in a world where Nazism has triumphed. Hence, in a world confronting a fateful, zero-sum game of war, democracy must win and Nazism must be defeated. For democracy to triumph, Egypt and the Arab world must support the democratic camp and the Allies. More generally, it appears that for Zayyat, the historical anti-colonial, anti-British struggle for independence must be postponed until the war against Nazism is won.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

As I have tried to show in other places, Hakim, ‘Aqqad, and Zayyat were not the exception but the rule. An historian who is interested in exploring the modes in which the Egyptians imagined and perceived Hitler and Nazism can surely see that mainstream intellectuals, journalists and other middle-class *effendi* voices in Egypt’s public sphere developed profoundly negative attitudes and sentiments towards the German dictator. In contrast to the widely held perception, shared by historians and observers, that the Egyptian public tended to develop pro-German positions, this study shows that major public intellectuals were anti-fascist, anti-Nazi, and anti-Hitlerian in particular. The anti-Hitlerian mood was also expressed in the portrayal of a monstrous image of the Führer in the popular illustrated magazines and cartoons. The overall aim

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

was to demonize him in the broader readership communities in Egypt and the Arab world. The substantial defeat of Rommel and Hitler in the North African campaign, already by the end of 1942, and eventually Nazi Germany's defeat in Europe in 1944-1945, gave complete legitimization to these negative images and representations, and actually justified the intellectual struggle against Hitler and Nazism during the war even when it seemed as though Hitler would emerge victorious. Thus, these three liberal intellectuals looked at Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler from a variety of angles and using different discursive genres, and demonstrated courage, integrity, and complete commitment to Britain and the Allied cause until the victory over the Nazi threat was complete.

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The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies was established at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2004. It aims to encourage and initiate research relating to Islam as a religion and a civilization from its advent in the seventh century C.E. until today, in the Arab world, elsewhere in the Middle East, in Asia and Africa, and in the West. To fulfill this goal, the Center organizes research groups, conferences, seminars and lectures; supports individual and collaborative research; grants scholarships; and encourages dialogue between scholars of Islamic studies and related fields. Islam is approached not only as a religion, but, more broadly, as a culture and a civilization. As such, the Center deals with a range of subjects that include religious thought and practice, material and intellectual culture, politics, society, economics, and interfaith relations.

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The Center is named in memory of the late Professor Nehemia Levtzion, a noted scholar of the history of Islam in Africa and the social history of Islamic religion and culture, who passed away in August 2003. He was also known for his public activities in the sphere of academic administration and related issues, both within the Hebrew University and on a national level.

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