

## “Elimination of the Jewish National Home in Palestine”: The Einsatzkommando of the Panzer Army Africa, 1942<sup>1</sup>

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In the summer of 1942, the systematic destruction of European Jewry by the Germans was already in high gear. In the Soviet Union, nearly a million Jews had been shot and killed by the SS, Wehrmacht, and local collaborators, or suffocated to death in the gassing vans of the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt; Reich Main Security Office). In December 1941, the killing facility for the destruction of the Jews in the *Warthegau* became operational in Chełmno/Kulmhof. In mid-March 1942, systematic gassing commenced in the Bełżec extermination camp; in early May, in Sobibór; and in July, in Treblinka. The first selections at the ramp in Auschwitz took place on July 4, 1942. Shortly thereafter, the murder of Polish Jewry proceeded rapidly. In addition, at the end of 1941, the first Jews had been deported from the German Reich for mass murder. From March 1942 on, Jews were deported from Slovakia and France to their death in the East, and the deportations from the Netherlands were also initiated in July of that year.<sup>2</sup>

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- 2 A comprehensive overview is Christopher R. Browning: *The Origins of the Final Solution. The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942*, with contributions by Jürgen Matthäus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 374ff., 416–421.

At this juncture — while the persecuted Jews in Europe were looking desperately for some way to flee to safety from the German sphere of power, and Palestine under the British Mandate was regarded as one of the favorite destinations for refuge — SS-*Obersturmbannführer* Walther Rauff boarded a flight to Tobruk on July 20, 1942. There he “received the necessary instructions for the deployment” of his *Einsatzkommando* unit of the SIPO and the SD “from General Field Marshal Rommel.” This unit was scheduled to take part in upcoming joint operations by German and Italian divisions pressing eastward in North Africa.<sup>3</sup> However, it is most likely that Rauff did not speak personally on that day with the commander of the Panzer Army Africa. At that same moment, Erwin Rommel was engaged in leading his troops into the first decisive battle of El Alamein, almost 500 km. east of Tobruk, and all transport space was urgently needed for bringing up supplies to the troops in the field.

Yet on the occasion of this visit, Rauff probably did place his unit officially under the command of one of the staff officers of the Panzer Army, and his *Einsatzkommando* unit of the RSHA was dispatched to Athens on July 29. It consisted of seven SS officers and seventeen non-commissioned officers and men, and was initially slated to be deployed in Egypt. The envisioned plan was that, after a complete victory in Egypt, the Rauff Commando was to be sent on to Palestine, where it undoubtedly would see action directed primarily against the Jewish population there.<sup>4</sup>

3 Ordensvorschlag [Recommendation for Decoration] Höchster SS- und Polizeiführer (HöSSPF) Italien v. 25.2.1945, Bundesarchiv Berlin (BAB), R 70 Italien/19; however, there is no reference to this conversation in the Ia/Ic/O.Qu. material of the Panzerarmee Afrika (PzAA) in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg im Breisgau (BA-MA); on Rommel, see Ralf Georg Reuth, *Erwin Rommel. Des Führers General* (Munich-Zürich: Piper, 1987); David Fraser, *Rommel. Die Biographie* (Berlin: Siedler, 1995).

4 Deutscher General beim Hauptquartier der Italienischen Wehrmacht (Dt.Gen. b.HQu.It.Wehrm.) an Oberkommando der Wehrmacht/Wehrmachtführungsstab/Quartiermeister I (OKW/WFSt/Qu.I) v. 14.9.1942, BAB, NS 19/3695; Summary by the British Secret Intelligence Service, October 23, 1942, United States National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (NARA), RG 226, entry 11.9A, box 25, folder 637; by contrast, the interpretation put forward by Richard Breitman, Norman J. W. Goda, and Paul Brown seems implausible; see idem, “The Gestapo,” in Richard Breitman, Norman J. W. Goda, Timothy Naftali, and Robert Wolfe, eds., *U.S. Intelligence and the Nazis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 154.

## A Mobile Unit of Radical Ideological Warriors

It is possible to reconstruct the course of decision-making in the formation of this Einsatzkommando with great precision. In the later morning hours of July 1, 1942, SS-*Standartenführer* Walter Schellenberg, head of Office VI in the RSHA and director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the SD, consulted with Himmler about the planned “deployment in Egypt.”<sup>5</sup> During the afternoon of that same day, Himmler gave a one-hour presentation to Hitler at the Wolf’s Lair.<sup>6</sup> It is highly probable there was also a decision taken at that time about the Einsatzkommando, because SS-*Obergruppenführer* Karl Wolff, head of the personal staff of *Reichsführer-SS* Himmler, immediately contacted the Wehrmacht High Command. Already on July 4, Wolff was able to report on the “Einsatzkommando Egypt,” stating that “a Wehrmacht order will be issued tomorrow.”<sup>7</sup> Although that order was not forthcoming until July 13, the Wehrmacht leaders noted the scope envisioned for the new mobile commando unit in accordance with what was desired:

Subsequent to agreement by the *Reichsführer-SS* and Chief of the German Police, the deployment of the SS Commando with the Panzer Army Africa will be handled as follows: the SS Einsatzkommando will receive its operational orders from the chief of the SIPO and SD, and will carry out its assigned tasks on its own responsibility. It is authorized, in the framework of its writ, and on its own responsibility, to undertake executive measures against the civilian population.<sup>8</sup>

5 *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42*. Bearbeitet von Peter Witte, et al. (Hamburg: Christians, 1999), p. 473; on Schellenberg, see George C. Browder, “Walter Schellenberg. Eine Geheimdienstphantasie,” in Ronald Smelser and Enrico Syring, eds., *Die SS: Elite unter dem Totenkopf. 30 Lebensläufe* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000), pp. 418–430; on Office VI: David Kahn, *Hitler’s Spies. German Military Intelligence in World War II* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 251ff.; Thorsten Querg, *Spionage und Terror – Das Amt VI des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes 1939–1945* (dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 1997); Michael Wildt: *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002), pp. 391–410; Klaus-Michael Mallmann, “Der Krieg im Dunkeln. Das Unternehmen ‘Zeppelin’ 1942–1945,” in Michael Wildt, ed., *Nachrichtendienst, politische Elite und Mordeinheit. Der Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003), pp. 324–346.

6 Terminkalender Reichsführer-SS (RFSS) v. 1.7.1942, BAB, NS 19/1447.

7 *Dienstkalender Himmlers*, p. 477.

8 OKW/WFSt/Qu.I an Dt.Gen.b.HQu.It.Wehrm. v. 13.7.1942, BA-MA, RW 5/690.

In content, the entire agreement was in keeping with the text that, since the spring of 1941, had served as the basis for the mass murder by the Einsatzgruppen operating in the Soviet Union. Central passages of this text, which evidently had “proven their worth” in practice, were simply adopted and taken over verbatim.<sup>9</sup>

Who then was *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Walther Rauff, the commander of Einsatzkommando Egypt? Rauff was born on June 19, 1906, in the town of Cöthen in Anhalt, the son of a bank official. He attended school in Magdeburg, where the family moved a year later, and graduated from high school in 1924. Rauff later noted that he had been raised by his parents “in a spirit of patriotism and the ethos of the soldier.” This upbringing may well have motivated him to join the navy in 1924. There, Rauff rose to the rank of 1st lieutenant, becoming commander of a minehunter. At the end of 1937, due to difficulties over an incident of “adultery,” he voluntarily resigned from service. A few months prior to this, he had joined the NSDAP. In January 1938, Rauff entered the ranks of the SS. In April of that year, he was employed in the SD-Hauptamt. Initially he worked there as an expert advisor on mobilization. Among his tasks was to determine who among the full-time staff was to be classified as indispensable and vital personnel in the event of war.<sup>10</sup>

In this capacity, Rauff took part, after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, in the top-level discussions of office chiefs in the SIPO and SD under Heydrich’s direction, and prepared the minutes of these discussions. The SS officer was thus very well informed about the mass murder taking place in Poland since the beginning of the war.<sup>11</sup>

9 Oberkommando des Heeres/Generalstab des Heeres/Generalquartiermeister (OKH/Gen.St.d.H./Gen.Qu.) v. 28.4.1941: Regelung des Einsatzes der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD im Verbands des Heeres, *ibid.*, RH 22/155.

10 Stammkarte, Lebenslauf, Personalberichte, BAB, SS-Offiziers-Akte (SSO) Walther Rauff; Vernehmung (Vern.) desselben (dess.), 28.6.1972, Bundesarchiv-Außenstelle Ludwigsburg (BAL), 201 AR-Z 76/59, Band (vol.) 15, Blatt (fol.) 76f., 83f.; a brief assessment of this is to be found in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, edited by Israel Gutman (New York and London: Macmillan, 1990), vol. 3, p. 1225. His June 1972 deposition, given in Santiago, Chile, is available online in English translation: <http://www2.ca.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/people/r/rauff.walter/Rauff-deposition-translation>

11 See the minutes of the discussion as transcribed by Rauff, BAB, R 58/825; on the mass crimes in Poland: Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Bogdan Musial, eds., *Genesis des Genozids: Polen 1939–1941* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004).

After a voluntary stint in the navy in 1940/1941, as commander of a fleet of minehunters along the coast of the English Channel, Rauff was ordered by Heydrich to return to the RSHA. He was appointed head of the Groups II D and VI F, sections that dealt with technical matters. *Obersturmbannführer* Rauff followed his superior Heydrich to Prague when the latter was appointed Deputy Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia. Rauff's job there was to direct organizing the technical intelligence service in Heydrich's new office. The deference he felt for his superior is reflected in the fact that, according to his own statements, he reached an understanding in Prague with "comrades" about how to proceed when playing cards; namely, to always let Heydrich win at Doppelkopf when they played together, because Heydrich simply "could not lose, no way."<sup>12</sup>

Especially as a result of his engaged commitment to the job as head of Group II D, Rauff rose on the SS ladder, becoming one of those most centrally responsible for the mass murder of the Jews. In SS logistics he was, for example, in charge of equipping the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union by supplying them with vehicles or munitions.<sup>13</sup> His assigned tasks also included development and oversight of some twenty gassing vans being used in the Soviet Union and Serbia, from the end of 1941, to exterminate Jews.<sup>14</sup> It was evidently his level of power of decision and close familiarity with the processes of the systematic extermination of the Jews that predestined him for the new post as chief of a mobile death squadron for deployment in the Middle East.

The other leadership cadre of the Commando came from diverse sub-sections of the RSHA. *Sturmbannführer* Wilhelm Beisner was included for his proven expertise on the Middle East. Beisner was born in August 1911, in Krückeberg near Hameln, and studied economics at

12 Stammkarte, Lebenslauf, Personalberichte, BAB, SSO Walther Rauff; Vern. dess. v. 28.6.1972, BAL, 201 AR-Z 76/59, vol. 15, fols. 77f.

13 Ibid., fols. 80–85.

14 *Nationalsozialistische Massentötungen durch Giftgas. Eine Dokumentation*, edited by Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein, Adalbert Rückerl et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986), pp. 82–86; Matthias Beer, "Die Entwicklung der Gaswagen beim Mord an den Juden," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (VfZ) 35(1987), pp. 403–417. A revealing letter addressed to Rauff on the technical problems associated with gassing vans dated June 5, 1942, is contained in Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein and Adalbert Ruckerl, eds., *Nazi Mass Murder: A Documentary History of the Use of Poison Gas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 228–230, a translation of the 1986 documentation volume *Nationalsozialistische Massentötungen*.

the universities in Königsberg and Frankfurt am Main. He entered the ranks of the SA in August 1930, joining the Nazi party a month later. In November 1932, he switched to membership in the SS. After working three years as a special expert on countries in southeastern Europe within the foreign affairs' section of the national NSDAP leadership, Beisner participated in a short military training program. He was then mobilized, in October 1939, for service in the Waffen-SS and engaged in German operations in Poland. In August 1940, he was appointed to a position in the RSHA and then was put in charge of building up intelligence structures in Zagreb (Agram). In the summer of 1941, ordered back to the RSHA, he headed the Special Section Arabia VI C 13, a post he held until receiving orders to join Rauff's unit in July 1942.<sup>15</sup>

*Obersturmführer* Hans-Joachim Weise was another SS officer whose previous activity also revealed something about the planned area of operations of the Einsatzkommando. Weise, born in 1911 in Apolda, joined the NSDAP early on, in 1928, after completing an intermediate high school certificate (*Mittlere Reife*) and training as a textile technician; he joined the SS in December 1930. After a temporary stint as an auxiliary policeman, he found a job in 1934, working as a telephone operator in the NSDAP *Gau* head office in Thuringia. In early 1938, he shifted to the SD-Hauptamt in Berlin. In the fall of 1940, he completed a training course he had wanted to take at the *Führerschule* (SIPO Officers' School) in Berlin-Charlottenburg. This short course was hands-on preparation for "colonial service" with the SIPO and SD.

In January 1941, after being transferred to Office VI, he was placed in charge of the Special Section Arabia. Yet, that same year, he was replaced in this function by Beisner, who outranked Weise in the SS. Weise remained on as Beisner's deputy and was assigned, at the end of 1941, as a RSHA liaison officer to Amin el-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who had come to Berlin a short time before to seek asylum. Weise accompanied the Grand Mufti on his trips in Germany, Italy, and the occupied territories. He was also responsible for the personal safety of the high-ranking Arab guest.

15 Stammkarte, Dienstlaufbahn, Lebenslauf, Personalverfügung, BAB, SSO Wilhelm Beisner; Lebenslauf, *ibid.*, Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamts-Akte (RuSHA) dess.; Vern. dess. v. 4.11.1960, BAL, 503 AR 1650/67, fols. 6ff.; Vermerk Vern. dess. v. 5.9.1961, *ibid.*, fols. 17f.

In May 1942, Weise stated that *Sturmbannführer* Dr. Heinz Gräfe, Group Leader of VIC — and thus with official competence for the Soviet Union, Near East, and Far East — had instructed him to set up an *Einsatzkommando* for Rommel's Afrika Corps. But a short time later, he learned that power of command in the unit had been put in the hands of the higher-ranking Rauff. Weise's main job from then on consisted of liaison work with Arab collaborators. He was supposed to make use of these individuals in order to further German state interests.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Commando Sturmbannführer*, Franz Hoth was responsible for military intelligence. He was born in Stettin, in October 1909, and had completed a commercial apprenticeship course there. He later became an associate working in a ship chartering and management firm in Brunsbüttelkoog on the North Sea, at the mouth of the Elbe River. Hoth also became heavily involved there in promoting the National-Socialist cause. Among other things, he was a co-founder of the local NSDAP group. Hoth was an official member of the party from 1931 on, joining the SA that same year. He switched to the SS in April 1933.

Supposedly, it was specifically his active politics on behalf of the “movement” that created difficulties for him with his employer in Brunsbüttelkoog. Faced with a welter of pretexts from the firm management, Hoth claimed that he had been dismissed from his job, in August 1933, basically for this reason; namely, his politics. After working temporarily in a fish cannery in Kiel, a prospective new career opened up for him when he was able to begin work in the SD-Hauptamt in May 1934.<sup>17</sup> Initially a junior official in Berlin, he rose to become a department head, in April 1938, in the SS Corps Area Danube (*Oberabschnitt Donau*). In March 1940, Hoth took over as head of the SD Section Bremen.

In assessments of his performance, Hoth's “outstanding qualities as a military leader” were stressed, along with his National-Socialist views and talent as a gifted organizer.<sup>18</sup> Like most of his fellow men in the Rauff *Commando* unit, he also completed a *Kolonialkurs* at the *Führerschule* in Berlin, along with a course that same year at the Italian

16 Stammkarte, BAB, SSO Hans-Joachim Weise; Vern. dess. v. 12.1.1965, BAL, 415 AR 1310/63-P. On the Grand Mufti el-Husseini, see below.

17 Stammkarte, Dienstlaufbahn, Lebenslauf, Personalberichte, BAB, SSO Franz Hoth; Lebenslauf, *ibid.*, RuSHA dess.; Bericht Vern. dess. v. 15.3.1946, BAL, 518 AR 1201/62.

18 Personalberichte, BAB, SSO dess.

Colonial Police Academy in Tivoli. After this training, Hoth was assigned, in July 1942, to the Einsatzkommando Egypt, probably in part due to his personal friendship with Rauff.<sup>19</sup>

*Obersturmführer* Herbert Werth had been selected as head of the executive committee of the Commando. Born in 1909, in Wolawapowska in the Strelno District in Posen, he studied law and political science in Berlin and Königsberg. Already at this point in time, Werth decided to become active in the Nazi movement. In 1931, he joined the National Socialist Student League. He formally joined the NSDAP in August 1932, and the SS in October 1933. After completing his studies, in June 1937, he became a legal adviser for the German Labor Front in Königsberg, and a year later shifted to a post as candidate for inspector at the Gestapo office in Allenstein. After passing his exams, Werth was appointed detective inspector and assigned to Office IV in the RSHA, Gestapo headquarters, where he remained until his transfer to Athens as part of the new Einsatzkommando.<sup>20</sup>

*Obersturmführer* Kurt Loba was seemingly predestined to a position in administration. Born in Stahnsdorf near Berlin in 1913, he was employed in police administration in Großbeeren in 1930, and in 1937 shifted to the Gestapo office (*Gestapa*) in Berlin. He joined the SS and NSDAP in 1933, a few weeks after Hitler assumed power. After being transferred, in the spring of 1938, to Section II of the SD-Hauptamt, he was active there and later in the RSHA as an administrative head. After Loba applied for colonial service and completed a training course at the *Führerschule* in Berlin-Charlottenburg in the fall of 1940, the academy's director appointed him to organize further courses and see to the needs of the participants. Subsequently, the expert administrator Loba was assigned to the Rauff Commando.<sup>21</sup>

The seventh SS officer in the unit, *Untersturmführer* Waldemar Menge, was in charge of communication matters. Born in August 1916, in Kirchheilingen in Thuringia, he completed a commercial apprenticeship and two and a half years of military service in the Reich-

19 Bericht Vern. dess. v. 15.3.1946, BAL, 518 AR 1201/62.

20 Lebenslauf, BAB, RuSHA Herbert Werth; Stammkarte, Beförderungsvorschlag, *ibid.*, SSO dess.

21 Stammkarte, BAB, SSO Kurt Loba; Lebenslauf, *ibid.*, RuSHA dess.; Vern. dess. v. 27.10.1964, BAL, 415 AR 1310/63-P; Bewerbung um Verwendung in der Sicherheitspolizei und im SD für die Kolonien, Bundesarchiv-Zwischenarchiv Dahlwitz-Hoppegarten (BA-ZA), ZR 649/8.

swehr. In October 1936, he was appointed radio operator in the SD-Hauptamt. At the same time, he also joined the SS. During the war in Poland, Menge worked as a radio operator in the *Führer* Headquarters. Between November 1939 and April 1940, he served as head of the radio station of the SIPO commander in Warsaw. Subsequently, he was transferred to Tromsø in Norway, where he worked in the same function until being ordered to Rauff's unit, in 1942, as a radio operator.<sup>22</sup>

All the SS officers assigned to the Einsatzkommando Egypt shared a common origin, coming from the same age group. Aside from Rauff, Hoth, and Werth, all the others were born in a six-year span, between 1911 and 1916; so when they were sent to Athens they were all around the age of thirty. Even Commander Rauff had just turned thirty-six; Hoth and Werth were each thirty-two. Thus, the average age of the command echelon of the Einsatzkommando was clearly lower than that of the Einsatzgruppen active in the Soviet Union and differed even more from the age structure of the leaders of the Einsatzgruppen in Poland.<sup>23</sup>

Aside from their relative youth, a striking feature of these SS officers was their early engagement in the Nazi movement. Beisner, Weise, Hoth, and Werth joined the NSDAP, SS, or SA, and were thus ranked among the elite group of *alte Kämpfer*, or “old guard.” Weise held the record in this regard, having joined the Nazi party at the age of seventeen. The three other officers, who entered the NSDAP or one of its formations after January 1933, had nonetheless identified strongly with the Nazi party even before that. The main reason that Rauff, Loba, and Menge became formal members only a bit later was the fact that they were state employees, serving in the Reichswehr or police. Loba and Menge, the two youngest officers in the Einsatzkommando, were only twenty when they became full-fledged members of the Nazi movement.

In addition, three of the officers had gained experience in mobile security-police operations before being ordered to their new unit

22 Stammkarte, BAB, SSO Waldemar Menge; Lebenslauf, *ibid.*, RuSHA dess.; Vern. dess. v. 14.12.1961, BAL, 202 AR-Z 22/60, vol. 1, fol. 429.

23 See Klaus-Michael Mallmann, “Die Türöffner der ‘Endlösung’. Zur Genesis des Genozids,” in Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, eds., *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg. ‘Heimatfront’ und besetztes Europa* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), pp. 437–463; *idem*, “Menschenjagd und Massenmord. Das neue Instrument der Einsatzgruppen und -kommandos 1938–1945,” *ibid.*, pp. 291–316.

in Athens. In April 1941, Beisner had commanded Einsatzkommando Agram of the Einsatzgruppe Yugoslavia.<sup>24</sup> In March 1939, Weise was in one of the four Einsatzkommandos of Einsatzgruppe I, which entered Prague in March, after the final defeat of Czechoslovakia.<sup>25</sup> Hoth had been at least as active. He had commanded a SD unit when the Sudetenland was occupied by German forces in September 1938, and again a few months later when the rest of Czechoslovakia came under German occupation. From September 1939, Hoth served in Poland as commander of the Security Service Commando of Einsatzgruppe I under Bruno Streckenbach. He subsequently headed up Group II, responsible for SD affairs, on duty in the office of the *Befehlshaber der SIPO und SD* in the *Generalgouvernement* for a short time.<sup>26</sup> Finally, another striking feature is that at least four of the SS Einsatzkommando officers had asked the SIPO, as early as 1940, for an assignment abroad “in the colonies.” In January/February 1941, Hoth and Weise had even completed the six-week special supplementary training course for this together at the Berlin-Charlottenburg *Führerschule*.<sup>27</sup>

Chance finds of data in the archives also shed some light on the other enlisted men in the unit. Friedrich Pohl, born 1906, in Upper Silesia, applied for work with the police in 1927, after he had earned an intermediate high school certificate (*Mittlere Reife*). He started and then interrupted an apprenticeship as a technical draftsman and worked for five years in mining. From 1928 to 1936, he served with the Emergency Police, first in Beuthen and then in Berlin. There, in June 1932, he was one of the co-founders of the then still-illegal National Socialist Government Workers’ Association-Section Municipal Police. From 1936, he worked in the Gestapo Central Office and was later transferred to the RSHA, where he worked in internal affairs through November 1941. He was later sent to the office of the *Kommandeur der SIPO und SD (KdS)* in Warsaw to work in counter-intelligence. From

24 Vern. Wilhelm Beisner v. 4.11.1960, BAL, 503 AR 1650/67, fol. 7; Rundbrief RSHA IV Gst v. 16.5.1941: Einsatz der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD im ehemaligen Jugoslawien, BAB, R 58/241.

25 Lebenslauf Hans-Joachim Weise v. 24.7.1940, BA-ZA, ZR 358; Vern. dess. v. 12.1.1965, BAL, 415 AR 1310/63-P.

26 Lebenslauf, BA-ZA, ZR 559/13; Vern. Georg Schraepel v. 17.4.1964, BAL, 201 AR-Z 76/59, vol. 1, fol. 227.

27 Bewerbung Franz Hoth um Verwendung in der Sicherheitspolizei und im SD für die Kolonien, BA-ZA, ZR 559/13; dito (dto.) Hans-Joachim Weise, *ibid.*, ZR 358; dito. Kurt Loba, *ibid.*, ZR 649/8; dito. Herbert Werth, *ibid.*, ZR 735/10.

January 1942, he was assigned to the *KdS* in Kraków. His next transfer, in July 1942, should bring him via Athens to the Middle East.<sup>28</sup>

*Hauptscharführer* Christoph Schölling was almost directly transferred from the State Police Office in Münster to the Einsatzkommando Egypt. He had already received his departure orders and had been assigned as an area transport manager to oversee the transport of a number of vehicles for the Commando from Italy to Africa. But due to the difficult transport situation at the time, the convoy could not be put aboard ship. Schölling then was ordered to accompany the vehicles back to Berlin.<sup>29</sup> Four other members of the unit also came from Berlin. A newsletter of the Berlin State Police Office stated: “Members of the State Police Office Berlin assigned to the Commando Egypt, Detective Sergeant Hausding, Detective Sergeant Grunert, Criminal Investigator Pillasch and Criminal Investigator Däumer, left under orders on 29 July 1942.”<sup>30</sup>

So the officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates in the unit, aside from Beisner and Weise, were not individuals with proven expertise on the Middle East but rather were selected for service from the personnel of the RSHA and its regional associate offices, in accordance with the general needs of the mobile unit. Officially, the deployment of the unit in Athens readied for departure was classified as “confidential Commando matters,” and thus was subject to extensive efforts to maintain strict military secrecy. Nonetheless, the unit had sufficient public status that it had already been assigned an army postal number (02039) by the Army Chief Postmaster.<sup>31</sup>

To date, the historiography has totally ignored the existence of this unit. The extensive literature on Rommel’s Afrika Corps and National-Socialist policy toward Arabia makes no mention of the order given on its assigned mission, as formulated in cooperation with the Wehrmacht, or the composition of its officer echelon, staffed by radical

28 Lebenslauf, BAB, RusHA Friedrich Pohl; Vern. dess. v. 9.8.1967, BAL, 114 AR-Z 107/68, vol. 1, fol. 124ff.; dto. v. 14.7.1976, *ibid.*, 104 AR-Z 1670/61, vol. 14, fol. 3074ff.

29 Dto. Christoph Schölling v. 18.7.1984, *ibid.*, 114 AR 209/80, fol. 69.

30 *Mitteilungsblatt für die Staatspolizeileitstelle Berlin*, Nr. 33 v. 14.8.1942, BAL, Dokumentensammlung Verschiedenes 301 Ct. (O. 179).

31 Norbert Kannapin, *Die deutsche Feldpostübersicht 1939–1945. Vollständiges Verzeichnis der Feldpostnummern in numerischer Folge und deren Aufschlüsselung*. Bearbeitet nach den im Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv verwahrten Unterlagen des Heeresfeldpostmeisters, vol. 1 (Osnabrück: Biblio, 1980), p. 43.

ideologues, under the command of the fairly prominent senior officer Rauff. The planned central purpose of operations for the unit — the implementation of the “Final Solution” in mandatory Palestine — has likewise received no attention whatsoever until now.

### **Palestine Caught in the German Crosshairs**

The dispatch of the Einsatzkommando took on an explosive edge only in the broader context of the rapidly evolving strategic situation on the North African front at the time. After the advance and retreats of the previous year and the renewed conquest of Cyrenaica by early February 1942, Rommel had launched a new offensive with his Panzer Army on May 26. Pursuant to capturing the position in Gazala in mid-June, he turned to attack the strategically important fortress of Tobruk, held by the British. Surprisingly, Tobruk proved vulnerable and fell on June 21. Its deep-sea port, far from the British naval and air base at Malta, appeared to solve all logistical supply problems in one fell swoop.<sup>32</sup> As Churchill wrote, the surprise defeat at Tobruk was one of the most bitter of the entire war.<sup>33</sup>

On June 29, the Panzer Army Africa also conquered the fortress Marsa Matruh, located some 350 km. to the east, on Egyptian soil.<sup>34</sup> In the following days German and Italian forces drove the British units, believed to be defeated, onward to the east as they rolled on, and, in early July, stood at the gates of their presumably final defensive position near El Alamein, just over 100 km. from Alexandria. The conquest of Cairo, crossing the Nile, and reaching the Suez Canal now loomed as a feasible possibility on the desert horizon. The path to Palestine was now a relatively short matter: it was the same distance that the German

32 PzAA/Ia an OKH/Gen.St.d.H./Operationsabteilung (Op.Abt.) v. 21.6.1942, BA-MA, RH 2/623; *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* (DRZW), ed. Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, vol. 6 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1990), pp. 595–629.

33 Winston S. Churchill: *The Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1964), vol. 7, pp. 346f. In a debate in the House of Commons on July 2, 1942, Churchill said: “The military misfortunes of the last fortnight in Cyrenaica and Egypt have completely transformed the situation, not only in that theatre, but throughout the Mediterranean. ...We are at this moment in the presence of a recession of our hopes and prospects in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean unequalled since the fall of France.” See <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/420702a.html>.

34 PzAA/Ia an OKH/Gen.St.d.H./Op.Abt. v. 29.6.1942, BA-MA, RH 2/623; DRZW, vol. 6, pp. 637–641.

and Italian forces had covered in the span of ten days after taking Tobruk and advancing on El Alamein.<sup>35</sup>

The extensive strategic visions of the Nazis from the previous year now seemed on the verge of realization. In his *Führerweisung* No. 32, of June 11, 1941, Hitler had expressly stated that the aim of the upcoming military operations was for segments of the Eastern Army to press into Arab territory in the course of defeating the Soviet Union in order to link up in the Near East with the advancing Afrika Corps.<sup>36</sup> This strate-

35 A basic study is Ralf Georg Reuth: *Entscheidung im Mittelmeer. Die südliche Peripherie Europas in der deutschen Strategie des Zweiten Weltkrieges 1940–1942* (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1985); a brilliant overview in John Keegan: *The Second World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1989).

36 *Führerweisung* Nr. 32 v. 11.6.1941, in Walther Hubatsch, ed., *Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegsführung 1939–1945. Dokumente des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht* (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1983<sup>2</sup>), pp. 130f.; a basic study is Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie. Politik und Kriegführung 1940–1941* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1965), pp. 377–388; on the policy toward Arabia pursued by the Third Reich: Helmut Dan Schmidt, “The Nazi Party in Palestine and the Levant 1932–9,” *International Affairs*, 28 (1952), pp. 460–469; Mohamed-Kamal El Dessouki, *Hitler und der Nahe Osten* (dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 1963); Heinz Tillmann, *Deutschlands Araberpolitik im zweiten Weltkrieg* (Berlin [DDR]: Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1965); Robert Lewis Melka, *The Axis and the Arab Middle East: 1930–1945* (dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1966); Norman Stewart, *German Relations with the Arab East, 1937–1941* (dissertation, St. Louis University, 1975); Bernd Philipp Schröder, *Deutschland und der Mittlere Osten im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen u.a.: Musterschmidt, 1975); Anthony R. De Luca, “‘Der Großmufti’ in Berlin: The Politics of Collaboration,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 10 (1979), pp. 125–138; Alexander Schölch, “Das Dritte Reich, die zionistische Bewegung und der Palästina-Konflikt,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 30 (1982), pp. 646–674; Fritz Steppat, “Das Jahr 1933 und seine Folgen für die arabischen Länder des Vorderen Orients,” in Gerhard Schulz, ed., *Die große Krise der dreißiger Jahre. Vom Niedergang der Weltwirtschaft zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), pp. 261–278; Francis R. Nicosia, *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); idem, “Arab Nationalism and National Socialist Germany, 1933–1939: Ideological and Strategic Incompatibility,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 12 (1980), pp. 351–372; idem, “Fritz Grobba and the Middle East Policy of the Third Reich,” in Edward Ingram, ed., *National and International Politics in the Middle East. Essays in Honour of Elie Kedourie* (London-Totowa: Frank Cass, 1986), pp. 206–228; Jan Wanner, “Amin al-Husayni and Germany’s Arab Policy in the Period 1939–1945,” *Archív Orientální*, 54 (1986), pp. 226–245; Andreas Hillgruber, “The Third Reich and the Near and Middle East, 1933–1939,” in Uriel Dann, ed., *The Great Powers in the Middle East 1919–1939* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1998), pp. 274–282; Ralf Paul Gerhard Balke, *Die Landesgruppe der NSDAP in Palästina* (dissertation, Universität-Gesamthochschule Essen, 1997); Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, ed., *Deutschland und der Mittlere Osten* (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 2004); Stefan

gic goal was underscored anew by Foreign Minister Ribbentrop on July 9, 1942, during a discussion with the Japanese ambassador, Oshima:

However, if we can succeed in eliminating Russia as the principal ally of England and the U.S., and can advance through the Caucasus to the south, while Rommel on the other side is pressing forward through Egypt into the Near East, then the war will have been won. In any case, in the last four weeks we have come closer to this goal than the German leadership, even in its greatest optimism, could ever have hoped to achieve.<sup>37</sup>

On October 25, 1941, in the presence of Himmler and Heydrich, Hitler had formulated what should accompany this: “It’s good if we are preceded by the fear that we are exterminating the Jews. The attempt to establish a Jewish state will end in failure.”<sup>38</sup>

Rauff’s Einsatzkommando had been set up precisely for this task. At first glance its size may seem astonishing, since it consisted only of twenty-four men. But the experience of the Einsatzgruppen in Eastern Europe showed that the mass murder initiated by the Germans was often supported by local collaborators and thereafter could, solely under German direction, be smoothly and vigorously implemented. An analogy was present in the Near East, as numerous reports on the prevailing mood had long suggested: there were a large number of Arabs in the local population who would likely be willing accessories in these operations.<sup>39</sup>

Wild, “National Socialism in the Arab Near East between 1933 and 1939,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 25 (1985), pp. 126–173; the gravity of the situation was played down in Gerhard Höpp, “Araber im Zweiten Weltkrieg – Kollaboration oder Patriotismus?” in Wolfgang Schwanitz, ed., *Jenseits der Legenden. Araber, Juden, Deutsche* (Berlin: Dietz, 1994), pp. 86–92; idem, Peter Wien, and René Wildangel, eds., *Blind für die Geschichte? Arabische Begegnungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2004).

37 Aufzeichnung Gottfriedsen/Auswärtiges Amt (AA) v. 10.7.1942, Akten zur deutschen Auswärtigen Politik (ADAP) [Serie (Ser.) D (1937–1941), 13 vols., Ser. E (1941–1945), 8 vols., (Göttingen u.a.: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950–1979)], Ser. E, vol. 3, pp. 129f.; the potential of the Allied military forces stationed in Palestine was assessed to be weak, see Feindlagebild OKH [picture of the situation of the enemy] Army Supreme Command/Gen.St.d.H./Fremde Heere West v. 13.7.1942, BA-MA, RH 2/1588.

38 Werner Jochmann, ed., *Adolf Hitler. Monologe im Führerhauptquartier 1941–1944. Die Aufzeichnungen Heinrich Heims* (Hamburg: Knaus, 1980), p. 106.

39 On domestic collaboration in unleashing pogroms in Kauen, Riga, and Lemberg, see Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Volker Rieß, and Wolfram Pyta, eds., *Deutscher Os-*

In 1928, the cleric Hassan al-Banna had established the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It formed the core cell of modern Islamic fundamentalism. In 1936, the Brotherhood was but a small organization with some 800 members. Yet its ranks soon swelled, and two years later it boasted a total of 200,000.<sup>40</sup> The driving factor behind this upsurge was mobilization for the Arab uprising in Palestine, as passages of the Koran hostile to Jews were interwoven with antisemitic formulations of struggle from the Third Reich, and the hatred of the Jews was transformed into *jihad*, “holy war.”<sup>41</sup> The consequence was boycott campaigns and violent demonstrations under the slogan, “Jews out of Egypt and Palestine!”<sup>42</sup> In October 1938, a conference of Islamic parliamentarians “for the defense of Palestine” was held in Cairo; antisemitic tracts were distributed, including the Arabic versions of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast, the Syrian National Socialist Party, founded in Damascus by Antun Saadeh in 1932, was decidedly secular and totalitarian, as were the Phalanges Libanaises, founded in 1936, and based on the principle of the “strong leader.” They postulated a folk-ethnic superiority and, in their external forms, borrowed from the paradigm of the NSDAP, as manifest in their swastika flag and fascist salute with a raised hand.<sup>44</sup>

In Trans-Jordan, under the Hashemite Emir Abdullah, the most moderate country in the region,<sup>45</sup> there were also traces of antisemi-

ten 1939–1945. *Der Weltanschauungskrieg in Photos und Texten* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003), pp. 61–69, 79–84, 89–96.

40 Abd Al-Fattah Muhammad el-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers and the Palestine Question 1928–1947* (London and New York: Tauris, 1998), p. 98.

41 Matthias Küntzel, *Djihad und Judenhaß. Über den neuen antijüdischen Krieg* (Freiburg: Ça ira, 2002), p. 22.

42 Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement 1928–1942* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998), pp. 235–247; Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914–1952* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), pp. 139–154.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 146f.

44 Labib Zuwiyya Yamak, *The Syrian Social Nationalist Party. An ideological Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 53ff., 76ff., 101ff., 124ff.; Miloš Mendel and Zdeněk Müller, “Fascist Tendencies in the Levant in the 1930s and 1940s,” *Archív Orientální*, 55 (1987), pp. 2ff., 10ff.

45 Avi Shlaim: *The Politics of Partition. King Abdullah, the Zionists and Palestine 1921–1951* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 39ff., 54ff.

tism. The British representative in Amman noted in February 1941: “There has been a certain amount of pro-Nazi talk.”<sup>46</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, in 1939, King Ibn Saud offered the use of Saudi Arabia as a way station for German weaponry shipments to Palestine and openly expressed his sympathies for Nazi ideology: “All Arabs and Muslims throughout the world have great respect for Germany, enhanced by the struggle Germany is waging against Judaism, the arch enemy of the Arab nation.”<sup>47</sup>

In March 1937, Walter Doehle, the German consul general in Jerusalem, wrote a position statement on the future aims of German policy in Palestine in which he commented on the enthusiasm for Nazism among Palestinians:

Palestinian Arabs in all social strata have great sympathies for the new Germany and its *Führer*. These are sympathies that should be deemed even more valuable since they are on a purely abstract level... If a person identified himself as a German when faced with threats from an Arab crowd, this alone generally allowed him to pass freely. But when some identified themselves by making the “*Heil Hitler*” salute, in most cases the Arabs’ attitude became expressions of open enthusiasm, and the German gave ovations, to which the Arabs responded loudly. Enthusiasm for our *Führer* and the new Germany is probably so widespread because the Palestinian Arabs, in their struggle for existence, long for an Arab “*Führer*.” And because in their fight against the Jews, they sense that they share a common single front with the Germans.<sup>48</sup>

This glowing veneration for the *Führer* was confined not only to Palestine. A situation report from the German legation in Teheran emphasized the almost grotesque degree of enthusiasm among Muslims there for Nazism:

46 Renate Dieterich: “...in der warmen Jahreszeit ist ein Lagern im Freien überall möglich”: Die deutsch-transjordanischen Beziehungen bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs,” in Schwanitz, *Deutschland und der Mittlere Osten*, pp. 66–85, quotation p. 79.

47 Anlage zum Bericht Deutsche Gesandtschaft Djidda v. 18.2.1939, ADAP, Ser. D, Vol. 5, p. 680.

48 Deutsches Generalkonsulat Jerusalem an AA v. 22.3.1937, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes Berlin (PAAA), R 104791.

In his press, a Teheran printer of pictures made pictures of the *Führer* as well as of Ali, the first Imam. For months, these large pictures were hanging to the left and right of the front door to his shop. Anyone with the proper knowledge understood this juxtaposition. Its meaning: Ali is the first Imam, Adolf Hitler the last.<sup>49</sup>

Among Arabs, in the summer of 1942, there was indeed a concrete expectation that the Germans would soon be on the march, advancing in force into the region. In mid-August, a liaison officer commented on the situation in Syria:

The friendly mood to the Germans among the Muslim Arabs continues unabated. In general, they express the wish that the Germans might soon arrive and liberate the country from the occupying forces and from its misery. To speak about Hitler publicly, the Arabs use a number of pseudonyms. The newest code name for Hitler is "*Hajj Numur*," the tiger. Wishes for Hitler's victory often serve as a form of greeting.<sup>50</sup>

Correspondingly, a military handbook on Syrian political life listed pro-German parties and groupings almost exclusively: if the Wehrmacht should appear on the scene, they would not resist but rather would collaborate with the conquering forces.<sup>51</sup> That same year, the British Secret Intelligence Service assessed the situation in Iraq, concluding that 95 percent of the population there was also favorably disposed toward Germany.<sup>52</sup>

In the same tenor, a report by Schellenberg on Palestine noted:

The exceptionally positive attitude among Arabs toward Germans is largely connected with the hope that "Hitler will come" to drive out the Jews. Field Marshal Rommel has become a legendary personality. Thus it is that Arabs today long for a German invasion, and repeatedly ask when the Germans will arrive. And they are very unhappy that they have no weapons.

49 Dto. Deutsche Gesandtschaft Teheran v. 2.2.1941, *ibid.*, R 60690; see S. Djalal Madani, *Iranische Politik und Drittes Reich* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986).

50 Bericht V-Mann "Antonius" v. 13.8.1942, BA-MA, RH 2/1790.

51 Jon Kimche, *Seven Fallen Pillars. The Middle East, 1915-1950* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1950), p. 36.

52 Reeva Spector Simon, *Iraq Between the Two World Wars. The Militarist Origins of Tyranny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 34.

Schellenberg commented on the impact of German radio propaganda in Palestine:

The Arabs have an unshakable faith that the Germans will be victorious. The German short wave broadcasts are listened to only by a small number. But their content soon makes the rounds of the Arab people. It is exaggerated and embellished in an Oriental manner to the point where the original text can barely be recognized.<sup>53</sup>

Just how volatile the mood was in the summer of 1942, in heated anticipation of the arrival of the German forces, is reflected in the report of a liaison officer. He noted that part of the 9th British Army had remained in Palestine, despite the ever-more critical military situation, in order to defend the Jewish population there from Arab attacks.<sup>54</sup> Such defensive measures also appear to have been urgently needed, because in the course of the German advance, thousands of Arab soldiers had deserted the British army. By 1943, some 8,000 Arabs, 7,000 of them from Palestine, had deserted with their weapons and disappeared into hiding, so as to join Rommel's invasion later on.<sup>55</sup>

Already in June 1941, Hitler was contemplating possible collaboration between the Arabs and the Third Reich. He spoke of "utilizing the Arab liberation movement" as an important trump card for the Germans against the existing British position and presence in the Near East.<sup>56</sup> The decisive link between National Socialism and the Arab cause was antisemitism. A liaison officer reported in the summer of 1942: "The English have managed to make themselves hated

53 Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD (CdS) VI C 13 an AA v. 21.12.1942, BAB, NS 19/186; see Seth Arsenian, "Wartime Propaganda in the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal*, 2 (1948), pp. 417–429; Reimund Schnabel, *Mißbrauchte Mikrofone. Deutsche Rundfunkpropaganda im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Eine Dokumentation* (Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1967), pp. 258–313, 411–414; Bernd Trentow and Werner Kranhold, "Im Dienst imperialistischer Weltherrschaftspläne. Zum Orient-Einsatz des faschistischen Rundfunks im zweiten Weltkrieg," *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Rundfunks*, 7 (1973), no. 4, pp. 22–50.

54 Auszug aus Bericht V-Mann "Cuno" v. 31.7.1942, BA-MA, RH 2/1785.

55 Jacob C. Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine* (New York: Norton, 1950), p. 119; Nicholas Bethell, *The Palestine Triangle: The Struggle between the British, the Jews, and the Arabs, 1935–1948* (London: A. Deutsch, 1979), pp. 140f.

56 Führerweisung Nr. 32 v. 11.6.1941, in Hubatsch, p. 131.

throughout the Near East, especially because of their alliance with the Jews.”<sup>57</sup>

Erwin Ettl, SS-Brigadeführer and expert on the Near East in the Foreign Office, noted that same year:

The Arab Question is bound up insolubly with the Jewish Question. The Jews are the mortal enemy of the Arabs, as they are the deadly enemy of the Germans. Anyone in Germany who deals with Arab politics must be a convinced and uncompromising adversary of the Jews.<sup>58</sup>

### **Amin el-Husseini: Nazi Collaborator and Radical Jew-Hater**

The most important collaborator with the Nazis on the Arab side, and, at the same time, a rabid antisemite, was Haj Amin el-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. In his person, we can see exemplified the decisive role played by hatred for the Jews within the project of German-Arab cooperation. There are countless statements made by him during his lifetime that clearly articulate his antisemitic attitudes. For example, el-Husseini gave a talk on the occasion of the opening of the Islamic Central Institute in Berlin in 1942, which prototypically reflects his recurrent patterns of interpretation. On the one hand, he argued along fundamentalist Islamic lines, emphasizing: “Among the most bitter enemies of the Muslims, who for ages have professed their hostility and everywhere make use of spite and cunning in their encounter with Muslims, are the Jews and their accessories.” On the other hand, the Mufti was not only a religious fanatic. In order to disseminate hatred of the Jews, he also resorted to the central antisemitic stereotypes of Nazi ideology, as another passage from this lecture shows:

57 Wiedergabe Bericht V-Mann [reproduced report, liaison] “Cuno I” v. 6.8.1942, BA-MA, RH 2/1764.

58 Notiz Ettl/AA (undated/end of 1942), PAAA, R 27325; on Erwin Ettl, see Hans-Jürgen Döscher, *Das Auswärtige Amt im Dritten Reich. Diplomatie im Schatten der “Endlösung”* (Berlin: Siedler, 1987), pp. 168ff.; Frank Bajohr: “‘Im übrigen handle ich so, wie mein Gewissen es mir als Nationalsozialist vorschreibt’. Erwin Ettl – vom SS-Brigadeführer zum außenpolitischen Redakteur der ZEIT,” in Matthäus and Mallmann, eds., *Deutsche, Juden, Völkermord*, pp. 241–255.

In England and America, Jewish influence is dominant. It is the same Jewish influence that lurks behind godless communism, which is inimical to all religions and fundamental principles. That Jewish influence is what has incited the peoples, plunging them into this destructive war of attrition, whose tragic fate benefits the Jews and only them. The Jews are the inveterate enemies of the Muslims, along with their allies the British, the Americans and the Bolsheviks.<sup>59</sup>

Such passages indicate that el-Husseini and his rhetoric should not be characterized solely along one-dimensional lines as an Arab nationalist. Especially when he was concerned with eliminating the Jewish presence in Palestine or elsewhere, the Grand Mufti was a National Socialist and Islamic fundamentalist at one and the same time.

Who was Haj Amin El-Husseini? He was born between 1893 and 1897 to one of the two most influential families in Palestine. His grandfather, father, and brother before him had all occupied the religious office of *Mufti* (judge) of Jerusalem, but he had only a superficial religious education. He then embarked on a military career in the Ottoman army, where he also served during World War I.<sup>60</sup> After that, he became even more opposed to the newly created British Mandate in Palestine, and an advocate of the Arab cause. El-Husseini was one of the instigators of the pro-Syrian riots in Jerusalem in April 1920, and

59 Rede Mufti zur Eröffnung des Islamischen Zentralinstituts v. 18.12.1942, PAAA, R 27327; see Matthias Küntzel, "Von Zeesen bis Beirut. Nationalsozialismus und Antisemitismus in der arabischen Welt," in Doron Rabinovici, Ulrich Speck, and Natan Sznaider, eds., *Neuer Antisemitismus? Eine globale Debatte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 271–293.

60 Biographical: Simon Wiesenthal, *Großmufti – Großagent der Achse* (Salzburg-Wien: Ried, 1947); Joseph B. Schechtman, *The Mufti and the Fuehrer. The Rise and Fall of Haj Amin el-Husseini* (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965); Taysir Jbara, *Palestinian Leader Hajj Amin Al-Husayni Mufti of Jerusalem* (Princeton: Kingston Press, 1985); Klaus Gensicke, *Der Mufti von Jerusalem, Amin el-Husseini, und die Nationalsozialisten* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1988); Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem. Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Zvi Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti. Haj Amin al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 1993); playing down the gravity of the figure: Rainer Zimmer-Winkel, ed., *Eine umstrittene Figur: Hadj Amin al-Husseini – Mufti von Jerusalem* (Trier: Aphorisma, 1999); Gerhard Höpp, ed., *Mufti-Papiere. Briefe, Memoranden, Reden und Aufrufe Amin al-Husainis aus dem Exil, 1940–1945* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2001).

also steered them in an anti-Jewish direction. The result was five Jews dead and 234 injured. El-Husseini fled to Syria and was sentenced in absentia by the British to ten years in prison.<sup>61</sup>

But exile and condemnation did not spell the early political end of the demagogue. Rather, the British awarded him with an important office, in a conciliatory move toward the Palestinian-Arab national movement. In a manipulated electoral procedure, he was named Mufti of Jerusalem; the next year, he became President of the Supreme Muslim Council, which the British had created. Thus, in a very short time, he found himself exercising the greatest influence of any Arab in Palestine.<sup>62</sup> In the meanwhile, Arab riots in 1921 led to the death of forty-seven Jews. In 1929, a renewed wave of disturbances took a total of 133 Jewish lives.

It was precisely the terror that raged in 1929 that indicates vividly the fact that those who were behind the disturbances were not simply seeking to prevent the mounting Zionist immigration; rather they were fighting the essence of Jewish life in Palestine as a whole. Responding to calls on August 16, 1929, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammed, 2,000 Muslims descended on the Western Wall in Jerusalem, shouting

61 On Arab politics in Palestine, see John Marlowe, *Rebellion in Palestine* (London: Cresset Press, 1946); idem, *The Seat of Pilate. An Account of the Palestine Mandate* (London: Cresset Press, 1959); Albert M. Hyamson, *Palestine under the Mandate 1920–1948* (London: Methuen, 1950); Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement. Vol. 1: 1918–1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974); idem, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement. Vol. 2: 1929–1939. From Riots to Rebellion* (London: Frank Cass, 1977); idem, *In Search of Arab Unity 1930–1945* (London: Frank Cass, 1986); Tom Bowden, “The Politics of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine 1936–39,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 11(1975), pp. 147–174; Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine. The Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict 1917–1929* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978); Michael J. Cohen, *Palestine: Retreat from the Mandate. The Making of British Policy, 1936–45* (London: Paul Elek, 1978); idem, *The Origins and Evolution of the Arab-Zionist Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); idem and Martin Kolinsky, eds., *Britain and the Middle East in the 1930s. Security Problems, 1935–1939* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Ann Mosely Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917–1939. The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1979); David Th. Schiller, *Palästinenser zwischen Terrorismus und Diplomatie. Die paramilitärische palästinensische Nationalbewegung von 1918 bis 1981* (Munich: Bernard & Graefe, 1982); Uri M. Kupferschmidt, *The Supreme Muslim Council. Islam under the British Mandate for Palestine* (Leiden: Brill, 1987); Issa Khalaf, *Politics in Palestine. Arab Factionalism and Social Disintegration 1939–1948* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).

62 Gensicke, *Der Mufti von Jerusalem*, pp. 30–33.

slogans such as, “Kill the Jews.” In their frenzy, they beat up Jews praying at that holy site. A week later, on August 23, Arab rioting escalated in the city, and that same afternoon a rumor also reached Hebron that Jews were slaughtering Arabs in Jerusalem. Centuries of the small Jewish minority’s peaceful coexistence with the Arabs in Hebron could not halt the subsequent wave of anti-Jewish violence that erupted. On August 24, 1929, an all-out massacre took place in Hebron, and sixty-seven Jews were murdered.<sup>63</sup>

Following the Nazi rise to power in Germany, the Mufti immediately commanded great sympathy and admiration. In March 1933, he sent the new rulers in Berlin his best wishes, stressing in particular his unconditional support for the struggle against Jewish influence.<sup>64</sup> In 1937, el-Husseini intensified his contacts with Germany and tried to obtain financial aid. The Nazis’ increased interest in the region and search for potential allies there was manifest in the trip to the Near East taken by Herbert Hagen, the head of the Judenreferat in the SD-Hauptamt, and by his associate Adolf Eichmann in the fall of 1937.<sup>65</sup>

After a new Arab revolt erupted in mandatory Palestine — beginning in April 1936, and which, by October 15, 1936, cost some eighty Jewish lives<sup>66</sup> — the British Peel Commission published its report, on July 7, 1937, outlining a plan to partition Palestine and create a Jewish state on some 15 percent of the territory. Immediately thereafter a new Arab uprising flared, developing into an anti-Jewish and anti-British guerrilla war. In 1938, it cost 297 Jewish lives.<sup>67</sup> The Mufti had managed to avoid arrest by the British by fleeing to safety in 1937, to the grounds of the Al-Aksa Mosque. From there, he continued to lead the uprising.<sup>68</sup>

63 Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete. Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* (London: Little, Brown, 2000), pp. 314ff., 321–327; Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine*, pp. 209f.

64 Deutsches Generalkonsulat Jerusalem an AA v. 31.3.1933, PAAA, R 78325.

65 SD-Hauptamt/II 112: Palästina-reise-Bericht v. 4.11.1937, BAB, R 58/954; see Friedrich Paul Harald Neubert, *Die deutsche Politik im Palästina-Konflikt 1937/38* (dissertation, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität Bonn, 1977); Michael Wildt, ed., *Die Judenpolitik des SD 1935 bis 1938. Eine Dokumentation* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995).

66 Aufzeichnung AA v. 19.1.1937, PAAA, R 104786.

67 Schechtman, *The Mufti and the Fuehrer*, p. 73.

68 In detail, see Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, pp. 398–403, 415–443; for National-Socialist glorifications of the Arab revolt, see Giselher Wirsing, *Engländer, Juden, Araber in Palästina* (Jena: Diederichs, 1938); Karl L. Kossak-Raytenau, *Mord und*

A report by German Vice-Consul Herbert Dittmann gives an indication of the atmosphere in the country at the time, even if it might reflect to a certain extent what a Nazi official hoped to find. He noted that there was “anarchy for all practical purposes” in Palestine. Then he spoke about the methods being employed by the terrorists: “The initially small number of Arabs active in the uprising have managed in the meantime to gain the support of the entire Arab people.” Their methods are “often quite cruel.” The fanatic activists employed the “most extreme personal terror, which does not hesitate to perpetrate targeted killings.” People accused of cooperating in any way with the British mandatory administration had been murdered; at times their bodies were mutilated, their hearts torn out, or throats cut and tongues removed. Those murdered in this way were then buried with signs saying, “This is how we treat those who betray the national cause.”<sup>69</sup>

Such massive terror within the society abruptly interrupted the development of a civil society in the Arab community in Palestine. The Arab sphere broke its link with the British legal system and any semblance of constitutional law, instead using unbridled violence to pass judgment as it saw fit. The insurgents forced their will on Palestinian society and replaced the rule of law by arbitrary force. The society was now based on surveillance and informing on one’s neighbors. As Dittmann described the situation, it hunted down the “enemies of the revolution” and “un-Islamic” deviants.<sup>70</sup>

Not all Arabs in Palestine joined the faction led by the Mufti, becoming radical antisemites. But the consequence of this deluge of terror was that moderate voices were silenced; to advocate such views had now become a threat to one’s very life.

Dittmann confirmed that the terrorists were ultimately successful. They now could seriously be considered to have become the “agents of a popular movement.” He illustrated this by noting a development he had recently observed in the streets:

*Brand im "heiligen" Land. Ein Tatsachenbericht* (Herrsching: Deutscher Hort, 1939); Iwo Jorda, *Araber-Aufstand. Erlebnisse und Dokumente aus Palästina* (Vienna-Leipzig: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1943); Kurt Fischer-Weth, *Amin Al-Husseini. Großmufti von Palästina* (Berlin: Titz, 1943).

69 Deutsches Generalkonsulat Jerusalem an AA [German Consulate General Jerusalem to Foreign Office] v. 14.9.1938, PAAA, R 104790.

70 See also Yuval Arnon-Ohanna, “The Bands in the Palestinian Arab Revolt, 1936–1939: Structure and Organization,” *Asian and African Studies*, 15 (1981), pp. 244ff.

Suddenly the word went out that all who supported the national cause of Palestine should wear the same headdress as the insurgents, a *kaffiyeh* and *agal* [headscarf and double cord]. This order was adhered to by the entire Arab population in Palestine, Muslim and Christian, *effendis* and *fellahs*, so that today the *tarbush*, the headdress of the urban Arabs over centuries, has completely vanished from view, and the towns in Palestine provide an external image that is completely changed.

The insurgents had requested the Germans in Palestine to use swastika flags for their own protection in order to identify themselves. On the whole, in Dittmann's view, the Palestinian Arabs felt that, "it is possible for a united, fanatic people to force their will even on the English, who previously had been regarded as invulnerable."<sup>71</sup>

While the uprising in Palestine raged on unabated, the Grand Mufti managed, in October 1937, to flee from Jerusalem to Lebanon, under the very eyes of the British. Two years later, he fled to Iraq.<sup>72</sup> There he quickly established contact with an influential circle of military men well disposed toward the Germans, and politicians around Rashid Ali al-Gailani, who, in 1940, became the Iraqi prime minister, but was soon forced to step down in January 1941.<sup>73</sup> When it became clear that the British were successfully pressing his successor for a more critical policy toward the Axis powers, al-Gailani and the Iraqi military staged a coup against the government on April 1, 1941, with the support of the Mufti. The insurgents sought military assistance in Germa-

71 Deutsches Generalkonsulat Jerusalem an AA v. 14.9.1938, PAAA, R 104790. See, also, the report of the Viennese author Franz Schattenfroh, who traveled to Palestine in 1939: Franz Schattenfroh, *Britenfaust und Judengeist. Eine Reise durch Aegypten und Palästina im Schatten des Krieges*, (Berlin: Payer & Co., 1940), pp. 61–66; and the reports of Leopold von Mildenstein, the *Judenreferent* in the SD-Hauptamt in 1935–36, who also visited the Near East before the outbreak of the war: Leopold von Mildenstein, *Naher Osten – vom Straßenrand erlebt. Ein Reisebericht*, (Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1941), pp. 115; *Rings um das brennende Land am Jordan. Eine Fahrt bis zu den Quellen des flüssigen Goldes* (Berlin: Otto Stollberg, 1938), p. 63. On Mildenstein, see Klaus Drobisch, "Die Judenreferate des Geheimen Staatspolizeiamtes und des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS 1933 bis 1939," *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung*, 2 (1993), pp. 240, 251.

72 Joseph Nevo, "Al-Hajj Amin and the British in World War II," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 20 (1984), pp. 3–16.

73 Philip Mattar, "Amin Al-Husayni and Iraq's Quest for Independence 1939–41," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 6 (1984), pp. 267–281; Walid M.S. Hamdi, *Rashid Ali al-Gailani and the Nationalist Movement in Iraq 1939–1941* (London: Darf, 1987).

ny and Italy, shifting immediately to a confrontation course with Great Britain. A short time later, a British army corps landed near Basra.<sup>74</sup>

In this case as well, the uprising against the British Empire coincided with a direct attack on the Jews. On June 1, 1941, a pogrom broke out in Baghdad against the Jewish community there. The violence raged for two days and took 110 Jewish lives. Some 240 Jews were injured, eighty-six Jewish shops and workshops were plundered, and 911 houses and apartments destroyed.<sup>75</sup> On June 9, the Italian legation there reported that Jews “were continuing to be attacked and looted in Baghdad.”<sup>76</sup> Once again, el-Husseini and the Iraqis in revolt sought and found the help of the Nazis. But since Hitler was busy organizing airborne troop drops against Crete and preparations for the attack on the Soviet Union, German weapons shipments via Syria and the support of the German air force turned out to be far too modest in scope. As a consequence, the Iraqi army was quickly defeated by the British, and el-Husseini fled to Iran with al-Gailani.<sup>77</sup> After a few weeks there, he proceeded via Turkey to Italy, where he arrived in early October 1941, and consulted with Mussolini. On November 6, 1941, he relocated to Berlin, and al-Gailani followed him there on November 21.<sup>78</sup>

On November 28, el-Husseini had an audience with Hitler, during which Hitler raised the topic that especially interested his guest: “Germany supports an uncompromising struggle against the Jews,”

74 Geoffrey Warner, *Iraq and Syria 1941* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1974); Schröder, *Deutschland und der Mittlere Osten*, pp. 63–149; idem, *Irak 1941* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1980); Karl Gundelach, *Die deutsche Luftwaffe im Mittelmeer 1940–1945*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1981), pp. 235–254; see Rudolf Rahn, *Ruheloses Leben. Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen* (Düsseldorf: Dielerichs, 1949), pp. 152–181; Fritz Grobba, *Männer und Mächte im Orient. 25 Jahre diplomatischer Tätigkeit im Orient* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1967), pp. 216–248; Wilhelm Kohlhaas, *Hitler-Abenteuer im Irak. Ein Erlebnisbericht* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989).

75 Hayyim J. Cohen, “The Anti-Jewish Farhud in Baghdad, 1941,” in *Middle Eastern Studies*, 3 (1966), pp. 2–17; see Nissim Rejwan, *The Last Jews of Baghdad. Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), pp. 126–133.

76 Telegramm Italienische Gesandtschaft Bagdad [telegram Italian legation Baghdad] v. 9.6.1941, PAAA, R 29885.

77 Łukasz Hirszowicz, *The Third Reich and the Arab East* (London and Toronto: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1966), pp. 166–170.

78 Gensicke, *Der Mufti von Jerusalem*, pp. 55ff.; for an approach that plays down the gravity of all this, see Renate Dieterich, “Rāšīd Ālī al-Kailānī in Berlin — ein arabischer Nationalist in NS-Deutschland,” in *Al-Rafidayn. Jahrbuch zu Geschichte und Kultur des Modernen Iraq*, 3 (1995), pp. 47–79.

Hitler stated. “This of course also includes fighting against the Jewish National Home in Palestine, which is nothing but a focal point for the destructive influence of Jewish interests.”<sup>79</sup> He then spoke about the current military situation, emphasizing that the real German aim in the Orient was to “destroy the Jews living in the Arab area under the aegis of British might.” The Mufti thanked Hitler for these assurances, stating that, for his part, he had full confidence in the German initiative.<sup>80</sup>

This Arab solidarity with the Third Reich, primarily motivated by antisemitism, and with the common basis of the struggle against Jewish life in the Near East, was later repeatedly stressed and underwent further concrete elaboration. In a letter to the Reich foreign minister, the Grand Mufti and al-Gailani officially sought German support, in April 1942, for the “elimination of the Jewish National Home in Palestine.” Given such a formula for alliance, Ribbentrop did not find it difficult to agree.<sup>81</sup> Shortly afterward, the Mufti stressed that, “Arab interests are completely identical in thrust with those of the Germans.” Along with unity in the struggle against England and communism, there was agreement most especially with regard to fighting against the Jews.

Germany was the only country in the world that did not limit itself to struggling against the Jews solely on its own soil, but had also declared an uncompromising war on world Jewry. In this struggle of Germany against international Jewry, the Arabs felt a very close bond of solidarity with Germany.<sup>82</sup>

As had been evident earlier in his efforts to organize anti-British uprisings and anti-Jewish pogroms in the Near East, the Grand Mufti in exile in Germany was not satisfied with mere rhetoric and antisemitic tirades. Rather, he continued to pursue the vision of the destruction of the Jews and the simultaneous creation of a pan-Arab empire under his leadership. This was to culminate in a new Caliphate, yet to be established. Among other things, he declared his readiness to help set up

79 Aufzeichnung Schmidt/Büro Reichsaußenminister (RAM) v. 30.11.1941, ADAP, Ser. D., Vol. 13.2, p. 719.

80 Ibid., pp. 720f.

81 Mufti and al-Gailani an RAM v. 28.4.1942, PAAA, R 27326; Antwort RAM v. 28.4.1942, *ibid.*

82 Aufzeichnung Ettel/AA v. 26.6.1942, *ibid.*, R 27324.

armed units of Arab volunteers for the struggle. Trained by Germans, they were to take part side by side with them in the fight against the British in the Middle East. Subsequently, in the framework of the Special Staff F, under General Hellmuth Felmy, who had participated in the abortive German intervention in Iraq in 1941, the German-Arab Training Department (*Deutsch-Arabische Lehrabteilung*) was established. Like the Einsatzkommando Egypt, it was marking time, in the summer of 1942, in mainland Greece at Cape Sunion, awaiting imminent deployment.<sup>83</sup>

Along with his diverse contacts with the Italians, the German Foreign Office, and the Wehrmacht, it can be proven that the Mufti also had direct communication with the *Judenreferat* in the RSHA. A short time after his first meeting with Himmler, el-Husseini paid a visit to the Section Head IV B 4, *Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann. On this occasion (the visit must have been the end of 1941, or the beginning of 1942), Eichmann provided his much-impressed guest with an intensive look at the current state of the “Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe” by the Third Reich, and illustrated this with numerous statistics and maps. For his part, the Grand Mufti informed Eichmann that he had already received approval from Himmler that, after the Axis victory, one of the advisors on Jewish affairs from Eichmann’s section would go with him to Jerusalem in order to come to practical grips with the virulent questions still remaining there. Eichmann, who was very impressed by the Mufti, subsequently met with him a number of times.<sup>84</sup>

However, the basic questions pertaining to the “Jewish Question” in Palestine appeared to have been clarified already during their first meeting. This can be safely assumed, since el-Husseini later turned directly to Eichmann’s competent associate to discuss practical matters

83 Dienstanweisung OKW/WFSt/Abteilung (Abt.) L v. 21.6.1941, BA-MA, RW 4/v.538; Bericht Kommandeur Sonderstab F v. 15.8.1942, PAAA, R 27325; Hellmuth Felmy and Walter Warlimont, *German Exploitation of Arab Nationalist Movements in World War II*, NARA, Foreign Military Studies, P-207.

84 Vern. Dieter Wisliceny v. 26.7.1946, Yad Vashem Archives, TR.3/129; on Wisliceny, see Dan Michman, “Täteraussagen und Geschichtswissenschaft. Der Fall Dieter Wisliceny und der Entscheidungsprozeß zur ‘Endlösung,’” in Matthäus and Mallmann, eds., *Deutsche, Juden, Völkermord*, pp. 205–219; Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen* (Munich-Zürich: Piper, 1986), p. 37, by contrast, Eichmann’s defensive claim was that he was introduced to the Mufti and met him only once, at an official reception.

in more precise detail. There is evidence that the Grand Mufti met at least on one occasion with *Sturmbannführer* Friedrich Suhr, head of IV B 4 b (“Jewish Affairs”) during the first half of 1942, as Suhr’s secretary later confirmed.<sup>85</sup> During this period the Mufti was, as mentioned, directly assisted by *Obersturmführer* Hans-Joachim Weise, who later was assigned to Rauff’s Einsatzkommando.

The capture of Tobruk, at the end of June 1942, was the starting signal both for the RSHA and el-Husseini to render the plan for the destruction of the Jews in Palestine into more concrete terms. While the Einsatzkommando for the Panzer Army Africa was put together in Berlin and sent on to Athens to await further orders, the Mufti also intensified his activities to liberate Palestine. He offered to travel to Egypt and become active in propaganda work there in order to spur Arab collaboration.<sup>86</sup> In this connection, he also called for dispatching the German-Arab Training Department to Egypt.<sup>87</sup> His tactic to destabilize the British position in the Middle East and prepare it for a German invasion was summed up by el-Husseini in the following words:

Set up bands of Arabs as a fighting force and equip them. They will march to Egypt and other Arab countries in order to disturb and harass the enemy by destroying roads, bridges and possibilities for contact more generally, and to promote uprisings inside the country.... Set up regular Arab military units that will operate side by side together with troops of the Axis powers. These units will have a morally favorable impact in the Arab countries and will draw the volunteers in the British army to their side.... Dispatch weapons and munitions to Egypt behind enemy lines, and then to Palestine, Syria and Iraq — in order to lay the groundwork for uprisings and to harass the enemy.<sup>88</sup>

85 Vern. Margaretha Reichert v. 17.10.1967, BAL, 415 AR 1310/63/E 5, fol. 296; see Ernennungsvorschlag Reichsminister des Innern v. 8.4.1944, BA-ZA, ZR 37; Ordensvorschlag Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer Frankreich v. 21.10.1944, BAB, SSO Friedrich Suhr; Yaakov Lozowick, *Hitlers Bürokraten. Eichmann, seine willigen Vollstrecker und die Banalität des Bösen* (Zürich and Munich: Pendo, 2000), pp. 121f.

86 Briefentwurf Mufti an Duce v. 13.9.1942, PAAA, R 27324.

87 Aufzeichnung [sketch] Ettl/AA v. 22.8.1942, *ibid.*; Denkschrift [memo] Mufti an Chef OKW v. 30.8.1942, *ibid.*, R 27828.

88 Niederschrift dess. v. 29.8.1942, *ibid.*, R 27325; see Kriegstagebuch Amt Ausland/Abwehr II v. 13.7.1942, BA-MA, RW 5/498.

## The Overlooked Project for Mass Murder

It is well known that the Germans did not reach Palestine and the Rauff Commando did not embark upon its envisioned agenda of operations there. The halt at El Alamein, which Rommel expected would be a short stay-over, ultimately became a turning point for the advance of the Axis powers. After it had proved impossible to successfully resume German-Italian operations, the Panzer Army Africa was forced into a final withdrawal and retreat from Egypt and Libya by the power of the British counteroffensive that commenced in early November 1942.<sup>89</sup> As a result of the unfavorable course for the German forces of the second battle at El Alamein — as the conclusion, on September 3, made it evident that a conquest of Egypt would be deferred to a more distant future — the Rauff Commando was given orders to leave Athens in September 1942. It returned to Berlin and remained there, apparently still intact,<sup>90</sup> because precisely two months later the unit was deployed, at the very same strength of 7:17, in Tunis.<sup>91</sup> In Tunis, the Commando unit was assigned at least three more SS officers, and the personnel was strengthened from the original twenty-four men to 100.<sup>92</sup>

Out of consideration for Germany's close ally in Tunisia, which the Germans accepted as an Italian sphere of interest, the Rauff Commando did not organize a mass murder of the Jewish population there. Instead, Rauff and his men were put to work registering the Jews and deploying them at forced labor for the construction of fortifications.<sup>93</sup>

89 Edmund Theil, *Rommels verheizte Armee. Kampf und Ende der Heeresgruppe Afrika von El Alamein bis Tunis* (Vienna: Fritz Molden, 1979), pp. 67ff.

90 OKW/WFSt/Qu.I/III an Heimatstab Übersee (HStb.Üb.) v. 19.9.1942, BAB, NS 19/2500; Vern. Friedrich Pohl v. 14.7.1976, BAL, 104 AR-Z 1670/61, vol. 14, fol. 3075.

91 OKW/WFSt/HStb.Üb. an Dt.Gen.b.HQu.It.Wehrm. v. 26.11.1942, BA-MA, RW 5/690; see *Dienstkalender Himmlers*, p. 617; Waldis Greiselis, *Das Ringen um den Brückenkopf Tunesien 1942/43. Strategie der "Achse" und Innenpolitik im Protektorat* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1976).

92 Cds II C 1 an Chef Reichskanzlei v. 22.4.1943, BAB, R 58/860.

93 OKW/WFSt/Qu.IV an RFSS v. 8.12.1942, *ibid.*, NS 19/1775; Oberkommando Heeresgruppe (HGr) Afrika/Ic an OKH/Gen.St.d.H./Op.Abt. v. 19.4.1943, BA-MA, RH 2/600; Ordensvorschlag HöSSPF Italien v. 25.2.1945, BAB, R 70 Italien/19; see Daniel Carpi, *Between Mussolini and Hitler. The Jews and the Italian Authorities in France and Tunisia* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1994); Peter Long-erich, ed., *Die Ermordung der europäischen Juden. Eine umfassende Dokumentation des Holocaust 1941–1945* (Munich and Zürich: Piper, 1989), pp. 255f.; Raul Hilberg: *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 411–413.

Rauff's previous record makes it more than likely that if there had been less requisite consideration for the Italian ally and its wishes, Rauff would doubtlessly have been prepared to press ahead with the mass murder of the Jewish population in Tunisia, too. In addition, an assessment by Rudolf Rahn, the German ambassador in Italy, who expressly praised the "exceptionally energetic and successful activity of *Obersturmbannführer* Rauff," suggests that Rauff was probably only allowed to a very restricted extent to pursue his true calling in Tunisia.<sup>94</sup>

Shortly before the Axis troops surrendered in Africa on May 13, 1943, the Rauff Commando was withdrawn, on May 9, from Tunis and sent to Naples. It was then transferred for Security Police duties to the island of Corsica.<sup>95</sup> At the beginning of September, Rauff was placed under the commander of the SIPO and SD Italy, where he was responsible among other things for "combating partisans" in his new capacity as commander of the Group Upper Italy-West.<sup>96</sup>

The end of the Africa campaign of the Axis powers should not obscure a central fact: in the special strategic situation that developed during the summer of 1942, Rommel's Panzer Army Africa stood on the verge of a breakthrough into Palestine. The Germans had prepared for this scenario: with the Einsatzkommando under Rauff and certain support that could be expected from the Arab side in Palestine, the mass murder of the Jewish population in mandatory Palestine could also have been put into high gear once that breakthrough occurred. Down to the present, this plan has not become part of public historical awareness. There were some German state prosecutors who did at least hear certain intimations about these designs in the interrogations they conducted of the potential perpetrators after the war. However, the lawyers did not interest themselves in the murderous intention that emerged in these statements, since destruction of human life not car-

94 Deutscher Botschafter Italien an HöSSPF Italien v. 15.4.1944, BAB, R 70 Italien/19.

95 Rauff an HGr Afrika/Ic v. 11.5.1943, The National Archives Kew, HW 19/271.

96 Ordensvorschlag HöSSPF Italien v. 25.2.1945, BAB, R 70 Italien/19; Vern. Kurt Loba v. 27.10.1964, BAL, 415 AR 1310/63-P; on methods used in "fighting partisans," see Carlo Gentile, "Walter Reder — ein politischer Soldat im 'Bandenkampf'," in Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul, eds., *Karrieren der Gewalt. Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), pp. 188–195. Rauff's brief biography is available in English at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter\\_Rauff](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Rauff). He may have been recruited by Syrian intelligence in 1948. He later settled in Chile, where he died in 1984.

ried out was not a criminal offense that could be prosecuted in a court of law.<sup>97</sup>

It is obvious that the history of the Middle East would have taken a far different course, and it probably would never have been possible to establish a Jewish state if the project described here had been made a concrete reality by the joint action of the Germans and Arabs. It was only thanks to El Alamein and the second Allied front that opened up in November 1942 in North Africa that the Yishuv — at the time nearly half a million Jews in Palestine — was spared and survived.

*Translated from the German by Bill Templer*

<sup>97</sup> Efraim Dekel, *Shai. The Exploits of Hagana Intelligence* (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), pp. 236ff.; Yehuda Bauer, *From Diplomacy to Resistance. A History of Jewish Palestine 1939–1945* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1970), pp. 168ff.; Walter Laqueur, *Der Weg zum Staat Israel. Geschichte des Zionismus* (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1975), pp. 555ff.; Shlomo Aronson, *Hitler, the Allies, and the Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 79ff.; Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, pp. 462–465; all recognize the threat, but not the extent of concrete preparations for this by the Germans and Arabs.