

German Orientalism: Introduction

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Edward Said famously claimed that Germany did not have a “protracted sustained *national* interest in the Orient” and thus no Orientalism of a politically motivated sort.¹ With this statement he omitted Germany and German scholarship from his exploration of the power/knowledge nexus that legitimated and sustained the project of European colonial empire. “There is a possibly misleading aspect to my study,” he writes, “where, aside from an occasional reference, I do not exhaustively discuss the German developments after the inaugural period dominated by [the Arabist Silvestre de] Sacy. Any work that seeks to provide an understanding of academic Orientalism and pays little attention to scholars like Steinthal, Müller, Becker, Goldziher, Brockelmann, Nöldeke—to mention only a handful—needs to be reproached, and I freely reproach myself.”² Said writes that German Orientalism was interested in the professional study of texts rather than in the exercise of colonial power. Lacking a direct “national interest,” Germany’s Orientalist scholarship existed at one remove from colonial practice and administration. Germany “had in common with Anglo-French and later American Orientalism ... a kind of intellectual *authority* over the Orient,” Said writes; yet “there was nothing in Germany to correspond to the Anglo-French presence in India, the Levant, North Africa. Moreover, the German Orient was almost exclusively a scholarly, or at least a classical, Orient: it was made the subject of lyrics, fantasies, and even novels, but it was never actual, the way Egypt and Syria were actual for Chateaubriand, Lane, Lamartine, Burton, Disraeli, or Nerval.”³ In short, Said’s definition of Orientalism seems to leave no room for an exploration of the German case, which has consequently remained both underexplored and undertheorized until recently.⁴

The question, however, can and should be posed: Did Germany develop an Orientalist tradition of the sort described by Said? As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the answer is yes and no. In Said’s own words, Germany shared “a kind of intellectual authority” over the Orient, and it is well known that German Oriental-

ists filled prominent university positions in a number of European countries where they engaged directly in the work of empire building.⁵ Tuska Benes’s article in this issue, for example, sets out the case for German Orientalists in Russia. The presence and international reputation of German philologists, linguists, historians, philosophers, and archaeologists in the world of nineteenth-century Oriental studies is also beyond dispute.⁶ So how can this tradition of scholarship be assessed in a way that productively connects it to histories of imperialism and the exercise of power? Possible approaches include an inquiry into the flexibility of Said’s definition on the one hand, and an exploration of the distinctive characteristics of German Orientalism on the other.⁷ Can Said’s definition of Orientalism be thought through in a way that allows for an analysis of German developments? Alternatively, which aspects of Orientalism become visible if the German case is analyzed? As scholarship has recently highlighted the presence of a variety of Orientalisms—Polish, Ottoman, Persian, and Japanese—a general broadening and rethinking of the topic seems to be in order.⁸

Said’s definition of Orientalism is conceptually broad but historically specific. Orientalism is “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it.”⁹ Said ties this definition to the creation and maintenance of a colonial empire on the model of the British and French. Beginning with the work of Sacy, Said outlines a structure of thought and feeling in which scholarship aided and abetted territorial acquisition and provided crucial service to the creation of European hegemony over the East. Representations of the Orient gained currency through their portrayal of non-European realities and from their role in colonial policies. Clichés about the “manifestly different ... world” of Arabic culture and religion also acquired legitimacy and popularity through their constant circulation. With Orientalism, writes Said, “knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently,

without comment, from one text to another. Ideas are propagated and disseminated anonymously, they are repeated without attribution; they have literally become *idées reçues*.”¹⁰ Said illustrates the point with Gustave Flaubert’s bumbling fictional clerks, Bouvard and Pecuchet, who spend their time contentedly copying their “received ideas” from one book to another. Received ideas about the Orient enabled British and French colonial expansion throughout the Eastern Mediterranean—the specific focus of Said’s book—before passing into the ideological arsenal of the United States following World War II. The book’s impact was so powerful that following its publication it became impossible to separate the analysis of Orientalist scholarship from an awareness of the colonial contexts that created and sustained it.¹¹

Yet this strong focus on a connection between Orientalism and a particular form of European colonialism excluded other Orientalisms from consideration. Conceptually, the topic was much broader, taking in a panoply of possible “interests.” As Said writes, Orientalism was:

a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction ... but also of a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world.¹²

This broader definition offers possibilities for the German case as well as for others. Breaking the connection between Orientalism and European empire allows a different set of dynamics to emerge, namely those between Orientalism, nationalism, and imperialism. Is Orientalism a dynamic of nationalizing states, whether or not they possessed an empire?¹³ Is it the case, as Ussama Makdisi put it, that “in an age of western-dominated modernity, every nation creates its own Orient”?¹⁴ Here the German case—if not paradigmatic—is central. Because its empire came late and stayed small, Germany did not have a colonial empire on the model of either the British or the French. As the articles in this issue show, however, the Orient was the site upon which and through which German national and imperial visions were articulated and acted upon.

All of the authors in this issue outline—albeit in different ways and with different chronologies and emphases—how Orientalism was constitutive of German national culture in ways that went beyond the “purely scholarly” approach outlined by Said. They make this

criticism particularly strongly, claiming that German involvement with the Orient—referring specifically to the Ottoman Empire—has a dense and important material history. Following Sheldon Pollock, who some of the authors cite directly, they posit a rich German tradition of thought and action focused on the Orient that articulated “national interests” of various kinds, which were often imperial in their scope and direction. German distinctiveness comes through in the focus on religion—the Islam of the Ottoman Empire in Nina Berman’s and Susan Boettcher’s papers—and in the centrality of the Ottoman Empire and Central Asia to Germany’s Orientalist scholarship, as articulated by Tuska Benes, Gottfried Hagen, and Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous.

Here differences with Said’s account can be fruitfully drawn out. While Said’s founding Orientalist moment is the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt (1798–1801), with its melding of scholarship, militarism, colonialism, and geopolitical strategy,¹⁵ German Orientalism, by contrast, draws on two separate sources: first the presence of Islam in the Holy Land and along the long border between the Ottoman and Holy Roman (later Habsburg) Empires; and second, the “Oriental Renaissance”—the revolution in European thought (and by extension in German national conceptions) instigated by what Raymond Schwab called “the arrival of Sanskrit texts in Europe.”¹⁶ For the first case Berman foregrounds the *longue duree* of German religious, cultural, and political involvement in the Middle East from the eleventh century to the turn of the twentieth century, studying a range of literary texts and cultural practices. Boettcher likewise focuses on a long history of thinking about Islam as a central context for sermons about “the Turk” that were transmitted to audiences in sixteenth-century Germany during a period of military conflict between the Holy Roman and Ottoman Empires.

In the second case the founding moment is the translation of the Avesta by Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron in 1770, the subsequent “discovery” of Sanskrit, and the connections that developed between the discipline of Indo-European philology and the nationalist search for Germany’s cultural origins. The European interest in the ancient worlds and cultures of India and Central Asia, spurred by the work of Anquetil-Duperron and Sir William Jones, and brought to Germany by the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder and the Indologist Friedrich Schlegel, fueled a search for Germany’s ancient, but national, “Aryan” past. Tuska Benes’s article outlines the types of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century German thought that linked language to race, culture, and history and made the search for an ancient German homeland in the regions of Central Asia conceivable.¹⁷ These expeditions were often in the service of imperial projects, Russian in this

case. The linguist Heinrich Julius von Klaproth, for example, coined the term “Indo-Germanic” (as a nationalist substitute for “Indo-European”) as a result of his experiences on an ethnographic survey in the eastern Caucasus for the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1808.

The articles by Gottfried Hagen and Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous are concerned with a later period, when Said’s assessment that Germany lacked a “national interest” in the Orient no longer holds true. The trip of Kaiser Wilhelm II to Constantinople in 1889 and the agreement of Sultan Abdülhamid II to the Baghdad railway had opened large-scale German economic involvement in the Ottoman Empire. A formal trade agreement followed in 1890, as the German state and agents of its economy sought to incorporate pieces of the Ottoman Empire into a German-led sphere of influence in the period leading up to World War I.¹⁸

The relationships between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire had become more clearly national and imperial by the early twentieth century, and were thus closer to the type of Orientalism that Said describes, although both Hagen and Sensenig-Dabbous fruitfully critique and broaden Said’s definition. Hagen focuses on the activities of a diverse group of Orientalists, including journalists, geographers, political scientists, and politicians, in the formulation of German policy toward the Ottoman Empire before and during World War I. Sensenig-Dabbous, by contrast, focuses on one figure—the Hungarian count Laszlo Ede Almásy—and his many representations: the historical figure, the literary character in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient*, and the cinematic character of Anthony Minghella’s film of the same name. Almásy’s Orientalism is explored as a matter that generated numerous, and often mythical, interpretations of his life.

I conclude this introduction with a sense that an exploration of German Orientalism has multiplied ways of investigating the topic. All of the articles in this issue argue for seeing the concept in national and imperial, rather than colonial, frameworks. All argue for an extension of the chronological and geographical scope of analysis and for the addition of topics, namely religion. Finally, they all argue for the centrality of the Ottoman Empire, and its border with Europe, to the various forms taken by German Orientalism. A reminder of the profound and long-standing relationship between Germany and the Ottoman Empire—wiping away the historical amnesia that surrounds this topic, at least on the German side—is also entirely fitting in today’s context of the active discussion between Germany and Turkey about the latter’s possible entry into the European Union.

NOTES

¹Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 19. Emphasis in original.

²Said, *Orientalism*, 18.

³Said, *Orientalism*, 19. Emphasis in original.

⁴Some notable exceptions include Sheldon Pollock, “Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj,” in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 76–133; Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (Stuttgart: M & P, 1997); and James Pasto, “Islam’s ‘Strange Secret Sharer’: Orientalism, Judaism and the Jewish Question,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 40:3 (July 1998): 437–74. A small amount of work on Orientalism has come out of studies of German colonialism. See Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, eds., *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); and Jonathan M. Hess, “Johann David Michaelis and the Colonial Imaginary: Orientalism and the Emergence of Racial Antisemitism in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6:2 (January 2000): 56–101.

⁵On German academics in Great Britain see Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁶Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (1950; repr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) has a wealth of evidence on this point. See also Suzanne Marchand, “Orientalism as *Kulturpolitik*: German Archaeology and Cultural Imperialism in Asia Minor,” in *Volksgeist as Method and Ethic: Essays on Boasian Ethnography and the German Anthropological Tradition*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 298–336; and Edwin Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷All of the articles in this special issue claim that German Orientalism is distinctive from the British and French forms described by Said, but they read this distinctiveness in different ways.

⁸Thomas Lahusen, “Colonized Colonizers: The Poles of Manchuria,” in *Crossed Histories: A New Approach to Manchuria in the Age of Empire*, ed. Mariko Tamanoi (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005); Ussama Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism,” *American Historical Review* 107:3 (June 2002): 768–96; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); and Stefan Tanaka, *Japan’s Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁹Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

¹⁰Said, *Orientalism*, 116. Textual work thus lay at the center of the project of creating and maintaining Orientalism’s intellectual and political hegemony. This point is important in thinking about the German case. Said described German scholars as professionalizers rather than pioneers. The British and French instigated and exercised; the Germans elaborated

and bureaucratized.

¹¹This point was famously disputed by Bernard Lewis, who cited German Orientalism to make his case, in *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 108. The reviews of Said are too numerous to mention, but for two viewpoints opposed to Lewis see James Clifford, "On Orientalism," in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 255–76; and Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 1999). Both provide food for thought in analyzing the German case.

¹²Said, *Orientalism*, 12. Emphasis in original.

¹³This point was put forcefully by Pollock, who describes Orientalism as the forms of domination that operate within and are constitutive of national political cultures, in "Deep Orientalism?"

¹⁴For Makdisi this was a statement and not a question. See his "Ottoman Orientalism," 768.

¹⁵Said, *Orientalism*, 122.

¹⁶Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*, 11.

¹⁷For further information see her dissertation, "German Linguistic Nationhood, 1806–1866: Philology, Cultural Translation and Historical Identity in Preunification Germany," PhD diss., University of Washington, 2001.

¹⁸Sponsored by the Deutsche Bank, the Baghdad railway was, in the words of Roger Owen, Germany's "principal instrument" for the "opening up" of the Turkish economy. Beginning in the 1880s German military reformers, diplomats, bankers, and businessmen had entered the Ottoman Empire as members of diplomatic or military missions and as seekers of lucrative concessions and business opportunities. See Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800–1914* (London: Methuen, 1981), 189–215, especially pp. 191–6.