



HAL
open science

Islam, a 'Convenient Religion'? The Case of the 13th SS Division 'Handschar'

Xavier Bougarel

► **To cite this version:**

Xavier Bougarel. Islam, a 'Convenient Religion'? The Case of the 13th SS Division 'Handschar'. Xavier Bougarel; Raphaëlle Branche; Cloé Drieu. *Combatants of Muslim Origin in European Armies in the 20th Century: Far from Jihad*, Bloomsbury, pp.137-159, 2017, 9781474249423. 10.5040/9781474249454.ch-006 . halshs-04333630

HAL Id: halshs-04333630

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04333630>

Submitted on 10 Dec 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

“Islam, a ‘Convenient Religion’? The Case of the 13th SS Division ‘Handschar’”, in: Xavier Bougarel, Raphaëlle Branche and Cloé Drieu (eds.), *Far from Jihad. Combatants of Muslim Origin in European Armies in the 20th Century*, Bloomsbury, London, 2017, pp. 137-159.

Xavier Bougarel

On 10 February 1943, Adolf Hitler signed a decree creating the Croat SS Volunteer Division (*Kroatische SS-Freiwilligen-Division*), better known after 1944 as the 13th SS Division “Handschar”.¹ This was a turning point in the history of the Waffen-SS, with non-Germanic soldiers joining the organisation for the first time, after being recruited according to religious criteria. For the top SS officials involved in this project, beginning with Heinrich Himmler, the 13th SS Division was to bring together Muslims from Bosnia-Herzegovina and give them the religious rights that their fathers and grandfathers had enjoyed earlier in the Austro-Hungarian Army. Apart from this imperial reminiscence, however, recognising Islam within an SS division met more pressing political concerns. The goal was not just to transform this division into a showcase for the Muslim world, but also to forge in battle an alliance between Islam and National-Socialism, with the blessing of Amin el-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who had taken refuge in Berlin. At the time, some high-level SS officials made no secret of their sympathy for Islam, and Himmler himself, speaking to an audience of Nazi officials, described the Muslim religion as “a convenient and pleasant religion” because it promised a reward in paradise for soldiers that died in combat.²

After the war ended, the 13th SS Division was often presented as a horde of Muslims made fanatical by their imams. This was the view presented first in Yugoslavia, where in 1947, the State Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes described in these terms the place of religion in the 13th SS Division: “Young muftis [sic] were assigned each to one unit, serving as an example and guide for fanaticised soldiers. [...] Upon their arrival in Yugoslavia, the soldiers of this division, poisoned with hatred, [...] killed anyone not wearing a fez.”³ But this reputation quickly crossed borders, and also in 1947, Simon Wiesenthal wrote that the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Amin el-Husseini had “led the Mohammedans of the Balkans in a ‘holy war’ under the banner of the Prophet, in the manner of Goebbels.”⁴ References to the “cursed Handschar division” (“*zloglasna Handžar divizija*”) continued throughout the communist period, but were relatively marginal compared to the incessant denunciations of the Croatian Ustaše and Serbian Chetniks.⁵ Not until the 1990s, with the awakening of Serbian

¹ The term “Handschar” (*handžar* in Serbo-Croat) refers to a dagger with a slightly curved blade.

² Speech by Heinrich Himmler on 28 January 1944 to the directors of the Reich propaganda services, Institut für Zeitgeschichte München (IfZ), Reichsführer – Personalstab, Part IV, MA 316, pp. 66-67.

³ Report of the State Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes on the 13th SS Division “Handschar”, Archives of Bosnia-Herzegovina (ABiH), collection Provincial Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes, reports, box 6, document 60, pp. 2-3.

⁴ Simon Wiesenthal, *Grossmufti – Grossagent der Achse*, Salzburg-Vienna: Ried-Verlag, 1947, p. 48.

⁵ The Ustaša movement was inspired by Fascism and placed at the head of the Independent State of Croatia created by Germany and Italy in 1941. The Chetnik movement was a Serbian nationalist resistance movement that carried out many massacres of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina and gradually entered into collaboration with the occupying Italian and German troops.

nationalism, did the 13th SS Division become a subject of propaganda again. While Serbian media ceaselessly denounced the crimes of this division, a few timid attempts at rehabilitation appeared on the Muslim side: in the weekly newspaper of the main Muslim party, a former imam of the division presented it as a simple act of self-defence against Serbian Chetniks,⁶ and in a book published in 2000, the son of a dignitary of the Ustaša regime strove to demonstrate that the division had not committed war crimes.⁷ The 11 September attacks in 2001 changed the situation again, with Amin el-Husseini and the 13th SS Division being rediscovered by some polemicists who saw them as precursors for Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.⁸

This article does not aim to write the history of the 13th SS Division or to list its crimes, which were relatively well recorded by the Yugoslav State Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes. Instead, I would like to focus on the place held by Islam within this division, and what it teaches us about the integration of European Muslims into a very peculiar military formation: the Waffen-SS. In a first section, I will show how the Muslim elite of Bosnia-Herzegovina participated (or did not participate) in plans for a Muslim SS division, and how their attitude on this project changed as it was being implemented. Then, I will focus on how the Waffen-SS defined the status of Islam within the 13th SS Division, and on the possible gap between this official status and the actual military and religious life of Muslim SS soldiers. Lastly, I will turn my attention to SS imams, their sociological and religious profile, the place they held within the division, and particularly the degree of autonomy that they did or did not enjoy, and how they used it. In so doing, I hope to grasp the reality of Islam in the Waffen-SS more closely than other researchers writing about this topic, and thus help answer this question: was Islam really, for the SS leaders that sought to instrumentalise it, a “convenient religion”?

Creation of the 13th SS Division and role of the Bosnian Muslim elite

To understand how the 13th SS Division was formed in 1943, we must take into account two distinct processes. In the first process, in order to meet the needs on the Eastern Front and extend its empire at the expense of the Wehrmacht, the Waffen-SS began to recruit SS soldiers from outside the borders of the Reich and to gradually renounce its previous status as a force of volunteers. In the Balkans, this process was symbolised by the creation of an SS division in spring 1942, made up of ethnic Germans from the Banat drafted by force: the 7th SS Division “Prinz Eugen”. We must remember that at the same time, the Wehrmacht was setting up “legionnaire divisions” in Croatia, made up of German officers and NCOs and Croat soldiers, according to the then definition of Croat, in other words, including both Catholics and Muslims from the Ustaša State led by Ante Pavelić.⁹ In the second process, which is of more direct interest to us, the Bosnian Muslim elite’s initial strong allegiance to the new Croatian State gradually grew weaker and weaker. Indeed, following the creation of the Ustaša State in April 1941, the Muslim political and religious elite quickly rallied to the new power, on ideological grounds or, most often, out of the habit of trading their support of

⁶ Edib Jelašanin [Mustafa Čeman], “Uz 50-godišnjicu pobjede nad fašizmom”, series published in *Ljiljan*, from No. 118, dated 19 April 1995, to No. 121, dated 10 May 1995.

⁷ Zija Sulejmanpašić, *13. SS divizija Handžar. Istine i laži*, Zagreb: KDB Preporod, 2000.

⁸ See, for example, David Dalin / John Rothmann, *Icon of Evil. Hitler’s Mufti and the Rise of Radical Islam*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009.

⁹ The Independent State of Croatia, created in 1941, covered most of the territory of present-day Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

the central power in exchange for a guarantee of their safety and religious autonomy. But this alliance was weakened when massacres of Serbs by Ustaša militias triggered retaliation by Serbian Chetniks against Muslims.

So, beginning in autumn 1941, local Muslim notables from various Bosnian towns adopted resolutions denouncing Ustaša violence and asking Croatian authorities to re-establish order and to protect the Muslim population. Additional Chetnik massacres occurred in 1942, and some political and religious leaders met in Sarajevo in August 1942 to form a Committee for People's Salvation (*Odbor narodnog spasa*) headed by Mehmed Handžić, also president of the ulama association "*el-Hidaje*" ("The Just Path"). This committee's purpose was to organise aid for Muslim refugees, find weapons to protect the Muslim population, and inform the outside world about violence committed against their community. Concretely, the weapons procurement mission was assigned to Muhamed Pandža, member of the *ulema-medžlis*, the four-member council that headed Islamic religious institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Relatively autonomous Muslim militias were formed throughout 1942, a sign that the Muslim community no longer trusted the Croatian State. The largest such militia was DOMDO, set up in the Tuzla region and commanded by Muhamed Hadžiefendić.¹⁰ Likewise, the second half of 1942 saw a new wave of resolutions, this time addressed to German military authorities, asking them to arm and train the Muslim population. This is the agitated context that gave rise to the idea of creating an SS division made up of Bosnian Muslims.

Initially, the German authorities turned down all requests for weapons. Thus, in December 1942, General Lütters, the commanding officer for German forces in Croatia, told Muhamed Pandža to send his request to the Croatian authorities. At the same period, a memorandum dated 1 November 1942 was circulating among German officials. This memorandum, addressed to Adolf Hitler personally, is generally attributed to three people: Uzeir Hadžihasanović, an influential politician and *éminence grise* of the Committee for People's Salvation, Mustafa Softić, the mayor of Sarajevo and son-in-law of the former, and Suljaga Salihagić, a politician from Banja Luka.¹¹ This document presented Bosnian Muslims as descendants of the Goths, faithful supporters of the Reich, and a natural bridge to the Muslim world. It then proposed the creation of an autonomous Bosnian province under German tutelage and the formation of a "Bosnian Guard" based on DOMDO and other Muslim militias.¹² While German diplomats and military officials had reserves about the memo, it made its way to the desk of SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, where this mixture of racial rants, opening up to the Orient, and promises of easy recruiting appealed to the Reichsführer. So this document apparently brought together the Waffen-SS need for new recruits and the Muslim leaders' need for arms. Himmler ordered Gottlob Berger, the SS-Hauptamt commander in charge of recruitment for the Waffen-SS, to set up a Muslim SS division.

Some doubts remain about who wrote this memorandum and about its actual influence on Himmler's decision to create the 13th SS Division, emphasising how the rapprochement between top SS officials and Bosnian Muslim notables was an informal process with several middlemen. The most important and best known of these intermediaries was Amin el-

¹⁰ DOMDO is an acronym for *Domobranska dobrovoljačka pukovnija* ("Military Regiment of Volunteers"). Muhamed Hadžiefendić, born 1898, was an influential merchant from the town of Tuzla, a veteran of the Austro-Hungarian Army and a reserve officer in the Yugoslav Army.

¹¹ Other sources indicate that Muhamed Pandža wrote the memorandum.

¹² Memorandum to his Excellency Adolf Hitler, Führer of the German People, dated 1 November 1942, reproduced in Vladimir Dedijer / Antun Miletić, *Genocid nad Muslimanima*, Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1990, pp. 250-264.

Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who passed the memo on to Himmler. Having organised the World Islamic Congress in 1931, attended by a sizeable Bosnian delegation, el-Husseini enjoyed considerable prestige among the Muslim political and religious elite of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Living in Berlin since November 1941, he used his networks to serve the Reich, but failed to spark an uprising of the Muslim masses against the British Empire. In late 1942, el-Husseini was nearly completely sidelined following the failure of his plans for an Arab Legion and the German defeat in the Battle of El Alamein. By relaying the requests of Bosnian Muslims for weapons, then presenting himself as a privileged intermediary between the top SS officials and Bosnian Muslim notables, he salvaged his own legitimacy. On the Bosnian side, one of the most interesting middlemen was Suljaga Salihagić. An engineer educated in Vienna, Salihagić was elected as an MP for Banja Luka with the Serbian Radical Party in the interwar period, and therefore held a rather marginal place in the Muslim community. But after 1941, his knowledge of the German language and his overt Germanophilia made him one of the preferred contacts for the German authorities. In summer 1942 already, the Ustaša intelligence services in Banja Luka reported plans to send a memorandum to Hitler.¹³ Salihagić may therefore have been the actual initiator, with Uzeir Hadžihasanović and Mustafa Softić merely giving their more or less enthusiastic support. Lastly, this portrait gallery would be incomplete without Rudolf Treu. Grown in Skopje, Macedonia, where he frequented the city's Orthodox and Muslim populations, Treu became a teacher at the German high school of Osijek, Slavonia, in the 1930s, and frequented the Yugoslav Fascist movement "Zbor". In 1941, Treu was won over to National-Socialist ideas and became an agent of the Sicherheitsdienst,¹⁴ in charge of contacts with Muslim and Serbian notables in Eastern Bosnia. After the war, the Yugoslav secret services accused him of playing a major role in the creation of the 13th SS Division, but this is hard to verify. Yet in a transcription of a conversation with Uzeir Hadžihasanović dated 26 November 1942, Treu sensed that the latter was reticent to send his requests directly to the Führer, for fear of the Ustaša's reaction, and insisted heavily on the fact that the time had come to take action...¹⁵

In this initial phase, the main obstacle to setting up the 13th SS Division was the Ustaša State, hostile to a Muslim division that, if it existed, could fuel demands for autonomy for Bosnia-Herzegovina. Nevertheless, an agreement was signed on 5 March 1943 by the SS and the Croatian government, calling for Croatian authorities to recruit Muslims and Catholic volunteers and detach officers from the Croatian Army. But on the ground, the Waffen-SS continued to recruit Muslim volunteers without going through the Croatian authorities, and even attempted to extend its recruitment efforts to the Orthodox population. In April, SS officials inflicted further humiliation to the Ustaša State by organising a visit by Amin el-Husseini to Zagreb, Banja Luka and Sarajevo, with the goal of dispelling Muslim leaders' doubts about the planned SS division. The Grand Mufti helped mobilise the local Muslim elite, and also passed on their demands upon his return to Berlin: the SS division should remain based in Bosnia-Herzegovina, DOMDO must not be incorporated in it, and SS soldiers must be allowed to keep their weapons until the end of the war.¹⁶ These conditions laid out by Bosnian Muslim leaders were almost immediately cast aside by the Waffen-SS, which decided to incorporate DOMDO by force given the lack of volunteers. Muhamed Hadžiefendić put on the SS uniform then, but several DOMDO officers called for soldiers to

¹³ See Dušan Lukač, *Banja Luka i okolica u ratu i revoluciji*, Banja Luka: Savez udruženja boraca NOR-a, 1968, pp. 258-259.

¹⁴ The Sicherheitsdienst was the SS intelligence agency.

¹⁵ Archives of the Serbian Armed Forces (AOS), collection Third Reich, box 40 G, file 3, document 31.

¹⁶ Report from Amin el-Husseini to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 30 April 1943, quoted in Enver Redžić, *Muslimansko automaštvo i 13. SS divizija*, Sarajevo: Svjetlost, pp. 100-101.

desert and join the ranks of partisans. Despite the absorption of DOMDO and extension of recruitment to the Catholic population and to the Sanjak region,¹⁷ the new SS division still lacked personnel. Gottlob Berger travelled to Zagreb and, on 11 July, forced the Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs to sign a new agreement whereby the Croatian State would send the Waffen-SS two-thirds of Muslim recruits born in the years 1924 and 1925, and also authorising the Waffen-SS to take the soldiers, NCOs and officers it needed for the SS division from the Croatian Army. In the following months, the 13th SS Division finally reached the target personnel of around 20,000 men, but far from making Bosnian Muslims safer from Serbian Chetniks, it reduced their safety even further: DOMDO had disappeared, several units of the Croatian Army had been disorganised due to lost Muslim recruits, and the 13th SS Division was sent to France for military training.

The 13th SS Division's long assignment in France, then in Germany, was just one of the reasons that Bosnian Muslims gradually withdrew their support for this mainly Muslim armed force. SS Imam Hasan Bajraktarević, returning from a visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina in November 1943, thus explained in a report to General Phleps, commander of the 5th SS Mountain Corps, that hopes related to the SS division were declining. Not only had the division's return to the country been delayed, leaving the Muslim population exposed to Chetnik exactions, but many families of SS soldiers were among the refugees left without aid, and on 12 July, the 7th SS Division "Prinz Eugen" had killed several dozen Muslim civilians in the village of Košutice, including family members of several SS soldiers. Bajraktarević thus asked for the division to return to Bosnia-Herzegovina by year end, for humanitarian aid to be given to the refugees, and for an investigation into the Košutice massacre.¹⁸ In the end, the 13th SS Division returned home in February 1944, but the joy was short-lived. Deployed to the far north-eastern part of Bosnia, the division was engaged in ferocious fighting against partisans and carried out large massacres, especially in Serbian villages. Aiming to transform its deployment sector into a sort of SS military frontier, the division avoided going through Croatian authorities, but cooperated with various local military formations. Among these were not just local Muslim militias grouped together under the name "Green Frame" ("*zeleni kadar*"),¹⁹ but also local Chetnik groups. The general evolution of the war and the 13th SS Division's own contradictions soon eroded cohesion and desertions began to rise in August 1944. Such desertions sometimes involved compact groups of several hundred combatants, and totalled several thousand soldiers. This did not prevent the Waffen-SS from trying to set up a second Muslim division, the 23rd Division of the SS "Kama".²⁰ In the end, the remainder of the 13th SS Division was transferred to Hungary in November 1944, where it faced the Soviet and Bulgarian armies. The soldiers of the 13th SS Division then followed the retreating German Army, and surrendered to British troops near Klagenfurt, Austria, in May 1945.

What was the actual involvement of religious institutions in setting up the 13th SS Division? The division was formed during a period when the Islamic religious community was destabilised due to the *Reis-ul-ulema* Fehim Spaho not being replaced when he died in 1942, and due to the death of one of the four members of the *ulema-medžlis*. In this context, Muhamed Pandža openly came out in favour of recruitment for the SS division, travelling

¹⁷ Sanjak is a region on the border between Serbia and Montenegro, with a significant Muslim population. From 1941 to 1943, the Montenegrin part was occupied by Italy and the Serbian part by Germany.

¹⁸ Letter from Hasan Bajraktarević to General Artur Phleps, dated 15 November 1943, IfZ, Reichsführer SS – Persönlicher Stab, Part II, MA 302.

¹⁹ The term "*zeleni kadar*" appeared during the First World War, and referred to groups of deserters from the Austro-Hungarian army that sought refuge in the forest.

²⁰ In Serbo-Croat, "*kama*" means "dagger".

through the towns of Bosnia-Herzegovina alongside SS recruitment agents and encouraging the pupils of religious schools in Sarajevo to sign up as military imams. It is hard to know whether Pandža was acting in his own name or on behalf of the *ulema-medžlis*, but two of this council's other members were apparently more reserved about a project that would not please the ruling Ustaše. Mehmed Handžić, the influential president of the ulama association *el-Hidaje*, was in favour of the SS division project, but insisted to Amin el-Husseini on the need to arm local Muslim militias,²¹ and refrained from expressing his opinion in public. In the Sanjak region, Derviš Šećerkadić, the Mufti of Pljevlja, actively supported the recruitment of Muslim volunteers. At the local level, the Waffen-SS tried to rely on imams, who also played a non-religious administrative role in keeping the public registry. The Waffen-SS asked them to distribute propaganda, receive volunteers' applications, and deliver summons. Croatian authorities protested against such an instrumentalisation. It is hard to assess the magnitude of imams' participation in Waffen-SS recruitment, but an internal report of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs described them as "zealous recruiters",²² and a history of the 13th SS Division written by the SS-Hauptamt explained that, given the hostility of Croatian authorities, the SS could only rely on "itself and help from the Islamic clergy, which made a substantial contribution to setting up the division through exemplary cooperation with the Schutzstaffel [SS]".²³ In some cases, imams were indeed zealous: in Nevesinje, the head of the canton travelled across the countryside in search of volunteers, along with an imam and a priest,²⁴ and according to the Italian Consul in Sarajevo, this was a fairly common practice.²⁵ In Hrasnica, a village near Sarajevo, an agent for the Ustaša intelligence service claimed that the local imam went to town leading a contingent of 2,000 volunteers!²⁶ But the disillusion about the 13th SS Division also affected the religious community. In October 1943, even Pandža appears to have lost his illusions, as he attempted to create an unlikely Muslim Liberation Movement, before joining the ranks of the partisans, falling into the hands of the German Army, and ultimately being sent to jail under the Ustaša regime. Pandža's defection shook the Muslim community's confidence in the Waffen-SS and, according to Hasan Bajraktarević, the division's imams were also in shock. In any case, when the 13th SS Division returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina in February 1944, its relationship with the Islamic community had chilled considerably: the division's commander received no response to his letter asking for ten additional imams from the best religious schools,²⁷ and the division had to rely on its own imams to recruit new volunteers. With sometimes limited success: in June 1944, Imam Halim Malkoč left for western Bosnia with two SS officers to rally the Huska Miljković militia, which had several thousand men. However, this project failed and they returned with a miserable group of 60 volunteers.²⁸ With this general context in mind, we will now focus on the status of Islam and the imams' authority within the 13th SS Division itself.

²¹ Report by Gustav Winkler of his interviews with the German Consul in Sarajevo Erich Gördes, dated 28 April 1943, Political Archive of the Auswärtiges Amt (PA-AA), Kulturpolitische Abteilung, volume 5, pp. 171-172.

²² Report by Gustav Winkler on the political situation of the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina, dated 4 May 1943, ABiH, collection Enver Redžić, box 27, p. 4.

²³ History of the 13th SS Division by the SS-Hauptamt, dated 30 November 1943, IfZ, Nurnberg documents, NO 3577.

²⁴ Judgment in trial of Muhamed Tanović, dated 19 October 1948, ABiH, collection Provincial Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes, judgments, box 8, document K 306 / 48.

²⁵ Report by the Italian Consul in Sarajevo on the 13th SS Division, 1 May 1943, Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina (HMBiH), collection Ustaška nadzorna služba, box 6, document 1402.

²⁶ Message from agent "Darko-9", dated 8 May 1944, HMBiH, collection Ustaška nadzorna služba, box 13, document 3217.

²⁷ Letter from General Karl-Gustav Sauberzweig to *Naib-ul-reis* Salih Bašić, dated 15 June 1944, Library Gazi Husrev-beg Sarajevo, collection Ulema-medžlis, document without reference.

²⁸ Judgment in trial of Halim Malkoč, dated 5 November 1946, ABiH, Provincial Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes, judgments, box 3, document Ko 320 / 46.

Islam in the 13th SS Division, from the ideological project to the ordinary religious life

As already said, in 1943, Heinrich Himmler considered giving the future SS division the same religious rights that Bosnian Muslims had enjoyed in the Austro-Hungarian Army. In his letter asking General Phleps to begin recruiting Muslim volunteers, he wrote, “You can clearly grant the Bosnians, within our division, the former rights that they had in the Austrian Army: free exercise of religion, right to wear the fez.”²⁹ In the following weeks, Himmler himself enquired about the size and colour of the fez that the division’s soldiers would wear, and asked religious authorities about the diet of Muslim soldiers. While Bosnian ulamas, probably influenced by the prevailing practices in the former Yugoslav Army, thought that no particular diet was required, Amin el-Husseini insisted on the prohibition of pork and alcohol. Yet behind sometimes obscure discussions of ritual questions, there lay more important stakes, namely, how to transform Islam into a warlike political ideology. In an agreement between Gottlob Berger and Amin el-Husseini on 19 May 1943, it is specified that National-Socialism is a Germanic ideology that must not be forced upon Muslim soldiers, but Islam and National-Socialism are two worldviews that are similar because they share several common enemies – the Jews, Anglo-Americans, Communism, Free Masonry and Catholicism – and values, beginning with a “warlike attitude” (*kämpferische Grundeinstellung*). In this context, the soldiers’ ideological education was in the hands of military imams, under the supervision of the Abteilung VI (department VI) of the division’s staff, in charge of ideological questions and propaganda.³⁰ The imams’ activity was thus aimed chiefly at training good Muslim “political soldiers”, as noted in a directive sent to the imams on 15 March 1944:

“The imam is the representative of Islam within the division. He must awaken and channel the forces of religion to make the members of the division good SS members and good soldiers [...] National-Socialism and Islam are similar in their ideological principles. Moreover, they have the same enemies. The goal of [ideological] education is thus the same for both: a determined and energetic combatant who is ready to risk his life for a new and better European order.”³¹

Other circulars gave details on the role of Abteilung VI and the imams within the division. An imam was assigned to each regiment, then in 1944 and depending on availability, to each battalion and company. A directive dated 15 March 1944 distinguished between two functions: spiritual care (*geistliche Betreuung*) and ideological education (*weltanschauliche Erziehung*). For the former, the imams were mainly to celebrate the main religious holidays, to guide Friday prayers, and to carry out military funerals. The directive focused in particular on how to reconcile time dedicated to military and religious activities (notably on Fridays and during the Ramadan fast). Regarding their ideological role, the imams were to speak to the troops at least once a week on a topic chosen by Abteilung VI, and to take advantage of any other occasion to educate their men, while serving as a personal example, notably by taking direct part in combat. Once a month, the imams were to submit a report on troop morale to

²⁹ Letter from Heinrich Himmler to General Artur Phleps, dated 13 February 1943, IFZ, Reichsführer SS – Persönlicher Stab, Part II, MA 302.

³⁰ Letter from Gottlob Berger on the ideological and spiritual education in the Muslim SS division, dated 19 May 1943, IFZ, Reichsführer SS – Persönlicher Stab, Part II, MA 302.

³¹ Directive for imams of the 13th SS Division of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Volunteers, dated 15 March 1944, IFZ, Reichsführer SS – Persönlicher Stab, Part II, MA 302.

Abteilung VI. The imams also served as intermediaries between Germans and Muslims: they were to explain the customs of the Bosnian population to the German officers and NCOs, to help in negotiations with local notables, especially regarding quartering of troops, and even to participate in interrogations of prisoners and defectors. Lastly, they were involved in another essential activity for the cohesion and motivation of the troops, often neglected in studies of the Waffen-SS, namely social aid (*Fürsorge*), also supervised by Abteilung VI:

“An imam must be with the troops as often as possible, during active duty and when off duty. He must also look after the personal wellbeing of the members of the division and their families, and in agreement with the officer in charge of social aid, must initiate all necessary measures. He must also take part in all appropriate measures to ensure the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the troops, and thus increase their efficiency and combativeness (entertainment, groups for games or singing, etc.).”³²

Thus, the imams were given important functions that were partly reminiscent of those held by the Schulungsleiter in other Waffen-SS divisions or political commissars in the Red Army. Yet they were also caught in a complex military hierarchy that reduced their room for manoeuvre and increased the number of potential sources of conflict. On a military level, they obeyed their unit commander. In their religious functions, they were subject to the orders of the Divisionsimam. Lastly, in their ideological activities, they depended on the head of Abteilung VI and had to work side by side with the latter’s correspondents in each unit.

In reality, Abteilung VI had itself to fight to assert its existence in the face of officers that were not very interested in ideological issues and were even more indifferent to religious matters. Heinrich Gaese, the first head of Abteilung VI, threw in the towel after a few months and asked for reassignment to a combat unit.³³ His successor Ekkehard Wangemann complained that political work was neglected within the division, came into conflict with the commanding officer General Gustav Sauberzweig, and resigned in turn.³⁴ Within Abteilung VI, the imams held a secondary role: apart from the Divisionsimam, all the officers responsible for this department were Germans; among operating staff, Imam Osman Delić was the only one to work briefly for the department, writing anti-Semitic texts.³⁵ The Muslims that helped produce propaganda materials for the division were in fact lay people: Alija Selimbegović came from Ante Pavelić’s personal press department, and Omer Zuhrić was a second-rate author that had become a supporter of the Ustaša state in 1941. Moreover, there were few articles about Islam or authored by imams in *Handžar*, the division’s newspaper, which preferred to celebrate the Austro-Hungarian military tradition or to present the major principles of National-Socialism, sprinkled with anti-Semitic remarks. Obviously, this newspaper was intended more for the German officers than the Muslim troops, most of whom were illiterate. The imams were involved in some training activities: in April 1944, Imam Kasim Mašić took part in a political education course, but spoke about the customs of Bosnia-Herzegovina, while a German officer, Erich Wiegandt, was in charge of explaining the ties between Islam and National-Socialism.³⁶ In their respective units, the imams had to contend with their officers’ lack of interest in religious questions, and probably also their prejudices

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Before being made head of Abteilung VI, Gaese was a member of the editorial board for the *SS-Leithefte* magazine.

³⁴ Before joining the Waffen-SS, Ekkehard Wangemann had studied Protestant theology.

³⁵ Interview with Erich Elbling, former interpreter for Abteilung VI, Forlì, 22 April 2010.

³⁶ Outline for the political education course of 29 March 1944, IfZ, Reichsführer SS – Persönlicher Stab, Part II, MA 302.

against Islam and Bosnian Muslims. Evidence of this is seen in the term “Mujo”,³⁷ which the Germans used to refer to Muslims. Further evidence, at a different level, is visible in General Sauberzweig’s comments when the division crossed the River Sava to return to Bosnia-Herzegovina: the general called on the imams to explain to their German comrades the daily and religious customs of the Bosnian population, because “by crossing the Sava, we are entering an entirely different world.”³⁸

The limits set for Islam and its representatives can be seen in the fact that the combat of SS soldiers was never presented in terms of jihad, but always placed in a German perspective. Thus, in the newspaper *Handžar*, Imam Husein Đozo went over the duties of an SS soldier and called on his companions in arms to create a new world, to free Europe of Bolshevism, Capitalism and Judaism, and to bring Croatia the peace and order it was missing.³⁹ But not a word about Islam. The 13th SS Division remained a German and National-Socialist division, where Islam played only a secondary role. However, soldiers killed in combat were buried as *shahids* (martyrs of the faith): a circular dated 15 March 1944 noted that a soldier killed in combat must be buried in his uniform, without being washed or placed in a coffin; this is the burial technique reserved for a *shahid*. Imam Fuad Mujakić, interviewed in 2010, remembers haranguing soldiers preparing for combat against the Bulgarian Army, reminding them that those killed that day would die as *shahids*.⁴⁰ More generally, imams were responsible for religious rituals. The end of Ramadan was celebrated in October 1943 in Neuhammer, where the division was in training, and the Prophet’s Birthday was celebrated in March 1944 in Brčko, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Friday prayers were organised in the various units of the division. However, in April 1944, Ekkehard Wangemann complained that attendance was low: according to the regulations, soldiers’ attendance was optional, and many preferred to use this free time to rest or attend to other business. Fifty years later, Wangemann was still complaining to military historian George Lepre that Friday prayers were left up to each individual’s responsibility, officers and NCOs did not take Muslim religious customs seriously, and they tolerated the consumption of pork and alcohol, to the great displeasure of the imams, and the great pleasure of the soldiers:

“In fact, the young volunteers preferred soup cooked with pork and drank *šljivovica* [brandy] immoderately [...] I was unable to convince Sauberzweig that a young volunteer from a very simple background was unable to determine whether the consumption of pork or alcohol was in contradiction with the demands of his religion, especially if many German officers were unaware of the problem or didn’t care.”⁴¹

Thus, the fact that there were imams present in the 13th SS Division does not mean that religious observance was high. An internal division report noted that even some imams drank alcohol,⁴² and Imam Fuad Mujakić recalls taking part in this sort of arrangement with religious rules: when a German officer caught him eating pork with other soldiers and called

³⁷ “Mujo” is a diminutive of Muhamed, and is often used mockingly or pejoratively to refer to Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

³⁸ Circular from General Sauberzweig on the imams’ role within the 13th SS Division, dated 8 March 1944, IfZ, Reichsführer SS – Persönlicher Stab, Part II, MA 302.

³⁹ Husein Đozo, “Zadaća SS-vojnika”, *Handžar*, No. 7, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Interview with Fuad Mujakić, former imam of the 13th SS Division, Bihać, 9 May 2010.

⁴¹ See George Lepre, *Himmler’s Bosnian Division. The Waffen-SS Handschar Division 1943-1945*, Atglen: Schiffer Publishing, 1997, p. 184.

⁴² Report No. 8 on the situation for the period from 1 March to 6 April 1944, personal record for Karl-Gustav Sauberzweig, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BAL), Berlin Documentation Center.

him out, Mujakić calmly replied that it was permissible in Islam when there was nothing else to eat.⁴³

The return to the combat zone in February 1944 further disorganised religious life: the temporalities of war took priority over religious time, Friday prayers became irregular, and the imams' energy was mainly devoted to burials and the subsequent administrative formalities. In 2010, former Imam Adem Gadžo tells how, once on the Russian front, burials became his sole activity.⁴⁴ But returning to Bosnia-Herzegovina had other consequences for the imams of the 13th SS Division. Their propaganda activity, previously limited to soldiers in their unit, was expanded to address local populations as well. The imams notably took part in the propaganda tours that Abteilung VI organised in nearby Muslim villages, using a truck equipped with speakers and showing films. Thus, in October 1944, an agent of the Ustaša intelligence service in the village of Žabare (Čelić) attended speeches from staff officer Franz Matheis, new Abteilung VI head Georg Floritsch and Imam Halim Malkoč, whose comments he described as "empty words".⁴⁵ Imams campaigning for the Waffen-SS did not necessarily use religious arguments to persuade their audience: testifying to his judges in 1945, Kasim Mašić acknowledged that he had travelled across Bosnia-Herzegovina to recruit new volunteers, and had "spoken of the conditions for entering the SS division and of the [material] advantages that new SS recruits would enjoy."⁴⁶

Another area of activity for imams underwent a substantial transformation in spring 1944: social aid. Until then, this aid consisted of helping soldiers carry out the administrative procedures needed to obtain certain welfare benefits, writing letters to their families, and organising literacy classes. Once back in Bosnia-Herzegovina, social aid also targeted local populations: in collaboration with the Muslim charity *Merhamet* ("Mercy") and with the imams' participation, Abteilung VI organised the distribution of food and clothing in villages and refugee camps. Here, too, political propaganda and social aid went hand in hand. Lastly, between February and October 1944, the 13th SS Division attempted to transform its sector of deployment in north-eastern Bosnia into a sort of military frontier, where the Waffen-SS would exercise sole power, despite protests from Croatian authorities. This situation enabled the division's imams to exert some control over local religious life, as shown in a few surviving documents. Thus, in April 1944, the local waqf commission in Derventa complained to the *ulema-medžlis* that an SS commission was getting involved in a local conflict about the appointment of a new professor of religion, and some SS members were attempting to bribe or intimidate members of local religious institutions.⁴⁷ Four months later, the local waqf commission in Tuzla asked Croatian regional authorities whether minarets could be lit in the evening during Ramadan despite air raid alerts. In this case, the answer came from the Divisionsimam of the 13th SS Division: Abdulah Muhasilović transmitted authorisation to light minarets until one hour after *akšam*,⁴⁸ also stating that Croatian authorities had been ordered to prohibit the sale of alcohol to Muslims during Ramadan, and to close inns selling alcohol in Muslims villages.⁴⁹ However, this influence of the division's

⁴³ Interview with Fuad Mujakić, former imam of the 13th SS Division, Bihać, 9 May 2010.

⁴⁴ Interview with Adem Gadžo, former imam of the 13th SS Division, Sarajevo, 12 May 2010.

⁴⁵ Report by agent "IX-BS-31", dated 16 October 1944, Croatian State Archive (HDA), collection Izvorna građa NDH, file I / 7, document 577.

⁴⁶ Judgment in the trial of Kasim Mašić, dated 18 August 1945, archives personnelles.

⁴⁷ Letter from the local waqf commission of Derventa to the *ulema-medžlis*, dated 26 April 1944, Library Gazi Husrev-beg Sarajevo, collection Ulema-medžlis, document without reference.

⁴⁸ *Akšam* is the fourth of the five daily prayers.

⁴⁹ Letter from Divisionsimam Abdulah Muhasilović to the regional waqf commission of Tuzla, dated 15 August 1944, Cantonal archive Tuzla, collection Islamska vjerska zajednica Tuzla, box 692.

imams on local religious authorities did not necessarily go in only one direction. In March 1944, partisans leaving the city of Bijeljina due to the advance of the 13th SS Division instructed local imams to contact the division's imams and tell them the truth about the partisan movement, namely that it was protecting Muslims from Serbian Chetniks.⁵⁰

Despite a sometimes uncomfortable status and the somewhat relative religious fervour of their flock, the imams of the 13th SS Division enjoyed undisputed authority among the troops and even beyond, and this proved decisive during certain moments of crisis. Thus, on 17 September 1943 in Villefranche-de-Rouergue, a serious mutiny broke out in the division's engineering battalion. This mutiny was led by a Muslim officer and three NCOs (two Croats and one Muslim), and resulted in the execution of five German officers. But Halim Malkoč, the battalion's imam, opposed the mutineers and successfully turned back part of the troops, thus contributing to the eventual failure of the mutiny. However, contrary to what Mirko Grmek and Louise Lambrichs believe, based on a report by the main imam of the Croatian Army Mustafa Mehić, it is not certain that Malkoč used mainly religious arguments: in his own report, Malkoč makes no mention of such arguments.⁵¹ Several months later, in early May 1945 near Klagenfurt, the remainder of the 13th SS Division was preparing for surrender to British troops. At the request of certain imams, the division's commander Desiderius Hampel freed Muslim soldiers from their oaths, authorising those who so desired to return to Yugoslavia. Around a thousand of them set out for home, led by Imam Kasim Mašić.⁵² Yet here again, it is not certain that Mašić's arguments were religious in nature.

SS imams, between ideological radicalisation and relative autonomy

To better understand the role of imams in the 13th SS Division, we need to look at their individual backgrounds before and after incorporating the SS. A first group of around 15 imams, recruited when the division was created in 1943, was born between 1912 and 1919. In 1943, they were between 24 and 31 years old. Only the first Divisionsimam Abdulah Muhasilović was significantly older, being born in 1898. This initial "cohort" of SS imams was characterised by a relatively high level of studies. Most of them were from Gazi Husrev-Begova Madrasa in Sarajevo and the Higher Islamic School for Sharia and Theology, also in Sarajevo. In addition, Husein Đozo and Haris Korkut had studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Only Muhasilović had lengthy experience as a military imam in the Yugoslav Army, but several other imams were, at the time they joined the Waffen-SS, military imams in the regular Croatian Army or, in Halim Malkoč's case, in an Ustaša unit. Testimony by several imams emphasises Muhamed Pandža's personal influence in their decision to join the 13th SS Division. Therefore, thanks to Pandža, the Waffen-SS successfully attracted some of the most promising young ulamas of Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, those already serving in the Croatian Army may have been transferred without being consulted. Immediately after being incorporated into the 13th SS Division, the imams were sent to an Imamen-Lehrgang ("course for imams") lasting three weeks in Babelsberg, near Berlin. There, according to Zvonimir Bernwald, a young ethnic German who worked as an interpreter for the imams, Abteilung VI head Heinrich Gaese told the young recruits about the principles of National-Socialism and its areas of convergence with Islam, in compliance with the agreement between Gottlob Berger

⁵⁰ Abdulah Budimlija, *Moja sjećanja*, Bijeljina: BKZ Preporod, p. 62.

⁵¹ See Mirko Grmek / Louise Lambrichs, *Les révoltés de Villefranche. Mutinerie d'un bataillon de Waffen-SS en septembre 1943*, Paris: Seuil, 1998, pp. 323-324.

⁵² Interrogation of Mušan Tunović, ABiH, Provincial Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes, war criminals, box 2, document 60747.

and Amin el-Husseini. While the shared hostility to Jews, Bolsheviks and the British (then supporters of the Chetniks) did not pose any particular problems to the young imams, they failed to see the need to oppose Free Masonry and the Catholic Church. Moreover, the presentation of the Lebensborn – the institution in charge of caring for the illegitimate children of SS soldiers – sparked indignation. The imams could adhere to National-Socialist ideology, or silently tolerate it, but they could not renounce some religious interdicts.⁵³ Likewise, we cannot be sure that all the imams returned from Babelsberg with the same conception of their role.

Apparently, Abdulah Muhasilović saw himself more as a military chaplain than a political soldier, which explains his conflicts with his German superiors and his replacement by Halim Malkoč in October 1944, as the former Ustaša was probably more inclined to make Islam into a combat ideology. More generally, the writings of some imams before their incorporation into the Waffen-SS give us an approximate idea of their personal attitudes. Mustafa Hadžimulić published various articles in the Bosnian Muslim press on the figure of the Prophet, the main precepts of Islam, and religious teaching in school. His articles were strictly religious and devoid of any political dimension. Thus, his conception of the function of a military imam may also have been apolitical. In any case, his hierarchical superiors did not have a high opinion of him. In his personnel record, Hadžimulić is described as being “impenetrable” and “lazy”, his services rendered are “close to zero”, and his ideological attitude is simply “in order” (“*in Ordnung*”).⁵⁴ Other imams were more combative. For example, in an article published in May 1943, Hasan Bajraktarević presented Islam as an ideal worth fighting and dying for, and rejected religious fatalism.⁵⁵ This ideologisation of Islam was even more visible with Husein Đozo, whose positions in the 1930s were close to Islamic reformism and scientism, then evolving gradually towards social Darwinism wherein life is a combat and there is only room for the strongest and most determined. In 1941, just before Germany’s invasion of Yugoslavia, Đozo still appeared neutral on the “combat between the democratic and totalitarian visions of mankind.”⁵⁶ However, in the following months, he called for Muslim nations to side with the strongest – the Axis powers – and made multiple attacks of British colonialists and Jewish capitalists.⁵⁷ His calls in the newspaper *Handžar* to free Europe from Bolshevism, Capitalism and Judaism are therefore the culmination of an ideological radicalisation that occurred over several years, not just a one-time statement. Đozo’s personnel record has been lost, but his appointment as director of a new Imamen-Lehrgang inaugurated in April 1944 in Guben, East Prussia, suggests that his superiors were satisfied with his ideological convictions and services rendered.

The Imamen-Lehrgang in Guben was intended to train a second “cohort” of SS imams to fill the vacant imam positions in the battalions and companies. However, this second cohort was formed under very different circumstances. On the one hand, the religious institutions refused to cooperate, with the *ulema-medžlis* not answering General Sauberzweig’s request for ten more imams trained in the best religious schools. On the other, the 13th SS Division was

⁵³ Interview with Zvonimir Bernwald, former interpreter for Abteilung VI, Nesselwang, 13 July 2010. See also Zvonimir Bernwald, *Muslime in der Waffen-SS. Erinnerungen an die bosnische Division Handžar (1943-1945)*, Graz: Ares, 2012, pp. 47-55.

⁵⁴ Personnel record for Mustafa Hadžimulić, BAL, Berlin Documentation Center.

⁵⁵ Hasan Bajraktarević, “Smisao islamskog idealizma – značaj rada, borbe i žrtve u islamu”, *el-Hidaje*, vol. XI, No. 5-6, May 1943, pp. 108-118.

⁵⁶ Husein Đozo, “Kako islam gleda na čovjeka”, *Glasnik Islamske vjerske zajednice*, vol. IX, No. 4-5, April 1941, pp. 115-118 (here p. 115).

⁵⁷ See notably Husein Đozo, “Protuglavničarske smjernice islama”, *Hrvat – muslimanski godišnjak*, vol. I, 1943, pp. 63-66.

deployed in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the time, and could therefore handle its own recruitment, as seen in three significant examples.

The first example is that of Fadil Mehanović, a philosophy student from Vlasenica in eastern Bosnia. In 1941, Mehanović participated in the creation of an Ustaša gang in Vlasenica and, according to the 1 June 1946 issue of the *Sarajevo Daily*, spread terror among the region's Serbian population and took part in several summary executions. He disappeared after the partisans took control of Vlasenica in July 1942, and then he joined the 13th SS Division in 1943. Noticed for his level of studies and maybe also for his previous political activities, he was sent to Guben and became a military imam. At the end of the war, he was captured by the Yugoslav Army at the Slovenian-Austrian border, and sentenced to death in 1946.⁵⁸

The second example is that of Mušan Tunović, born in 1925 in a village near Gacko in eastern Herzegovina. Tunović spent four years at the Sarajevo Sharia Secondary School until the war forced him to interrupt his studies and join the Muslim militia of Gacko in charge of fighting the Chetniks. In 1943, Waffen-SS recruitment sergeants ordered this local militia to send a portion of its members to the 13th SS Division, and Tunović was part of this group. In 1944, he was sent to Guben as well, returning as a military imam, first for the short-lived SS Division "Kama", then in the 13th SS Division, which he followed to Austria.⁵⁹

Lastly, the third example is that of Safet Karić, born in 1920 in a village near Gradačac, northern Bosnia. Karić finished his studies at the Tuzla madrasa in 1936 and was appointed as imam in various small Bosnian towns. In 1941, he became a military imam in the regular Croatian Army before being captured and drafted by partisans in October 1943. Five months later, he was captured by the 13th SS Division and presented to the Divisionsimam, who decided to send him to Guben. He returned three months later and was also appointed as an imam for the SS Division "Kama" before being sent with other Muslim SS members to build fortifications on the border between Austria and Hungary.⁶⁰

The tortuous and harsh trajectories of Fadil Mehanović, Mušan Tunović and Safet Karić illustrate the complexity of the Second World War in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They also reveal the differences between this second cohort of imams and the first cohort of 1943: the dozens of pupils going through the Imamen-Lehrgang in Guben were younger, coming from small provincial madrasas or lacking religious training, and were not volunteers but had been incorporated by force in the 13th SS Division and then selected for Guben by German officers or the imams of their units. In Guben, they spent three or four months under the supervision of Imamen-Lehrgang director Husein Đozo, SS imam Haris Korkut, who taught the history of Islam, and Salih Hadžialić, the imam of the Croatian Embassy in Berlin, in charge of explaining the links between Islam and National-Socialism to the imams in training.⁶¹

The imams of the 13th SS Division, in particular those incorporated in 1943, enjoyed special authority that they used to win some autonomy from their German superiors. For example, Fadil Sirčo's personnel record describes him as a "good National-Socialist and a great friend of Germany", but also as a "fanatical Muslim" easily in conflict with the Catholic Croats in

⁵⁸ "Začetnik pokolja u Vlasenici osuđen je na smrt", *Sarajevski dnevnik*, 1 June 1946.

⁵⁹ Interrogation of Mušan Tunović, ABiH, collection Provincial Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes, war criminals, box 2, document 60747.

⁶⁰ Interrogation of Safet Karić, ABiH, collection Provincial Commission for the Establishment of War Crimes, war criminals, box 1, document 60745.

⁶¹ Đozo, Korkut and Hadžialić all studied at Cairo's Al-Azhar University.

the division.⁶² Similarly, Ahmed Skaka was presented by his superiors as a “fanatic of Muslim ideology”.⁶³ Moreover, some imams used their relative autonomy to protest openly against some German policies. In November 1943, as we have seen, Hasan Bajraktarević pressed General Phleps to bring the 13th SS Division back to Bosnia-Herzegovina and to open an investigation into the Košutice massacre; seven months later, Kasim Mašić wrote to the Divisionsimam to ask that the 7th SS Division “Prinz Eugen” cease all collaboration with the Chetniks and leave the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina!⁶⁴ Yet SS imams did not stray from their German superiors with regard to National-Socialist ideology or crimes committed by the 13th SS Division, even though three of them had signed the Sarajevo Muslim resolution of 1941 denouncing the crimes of the Ustaše against the Serbs,⁶⁵ and although Fuad Mujakić says that he refused to execute a man arrested on the edge of the forest, without facing any disciplinary action for this refusal.⁶⁶

In fact, conflicts broke out between the imams and their officers when German interests diverged too far from Bosnian Muslim ones, and the German collaboration with the Chetniks was therefore the main source of friction. In September 1944, Divisionsimam Abdulah Muhasilović tried with great difficulty to convince the imams that this collaboration was warranted by the priorities of fighting communism, and that they had the duty to explain it to the troops.⁶⁷ In Budapest in early October, Amin el-Husseini met with the division’s imams in a hastily prepared meeting, but this was not enough to tighten the ranks even though the Grand Mufti repeated his old diatribes about the Third Reich and Islam’s common enemies.⁶⁸ Over the following weeks, the 13th SS Division’s departure for Hungary was a moment of truth for some of the imams. According to George Lepre, citing the war diary of the 9th SS Mountain Corps, Abdulah Muhasilović organised a mutiny within the staff security guard, and deserted along with about one hundred men.⁶⁹ Osman Delić apparently deserted at the same period. Lastly, according to Abdulah Budimlija, SS Imams Hasan Bajraktarević and Mustafa Hadžimulić were shot to death at Brčko for opposing the marching order.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, most of the imams followed the remainder of the 13th SS Division until its surrender in Austria in May 1945. Why? Probably out of a mixture of ideological radicalisation, personal loyalties, and fear of surrendering to Yugoslav partisans or Red Army soldiers. Moreover, once in Hungary, they faced the practical difficulties of any desertion attempt. Thus, former Imam Fuad Mujakić recalls that Salih Šabanović had plans for a group desertion that were never implemented,⁷¹ and Adem Gadžo tells how Husein Đozo hoped that Turkey would enter the war in order to organise a collective surrender to Turkish troops.⁷² But Mujakić concedes that still others believed in victory until the very end.

⁶² Personnel record for Fadil Sirčo, BAL, Berlin Documentation Center.

⁶³ Personnel record for Ahmed Skaka, BAL, Berlin Documentation Center.

⁶⁴ Letter from Kasim Mašić to Abdulah Muhasilović, dated 16 June 1944, quoted in Thomas Casagrande, *Die volksdeutsche SS-Division “Prinz Eugen”*, Frankfurt: Campus, 2003, p. 282.

⁶⁵ These three were Husein Đozo, Hasan Bajraktarević and Ahmed Skaka.

⁶⁶ Interview with Fuad Mujakić, former imam of the 13th SS Division, Bihac, 9 May 2010.

⁶⁷ Speech to the imams of the SS Divisions “Handschar” and “Kama”, dated 6 September 1944, AOS, collection Third Reich, box 9, file 4, document 14.

⁶⁸ Speech by Amin el-Husseini to the imams of the 13th SS Division, reproduced in Gerhard Höpp (Hg.), *Mufti-Papiere. Briefe, Memoranden, Reden und Aufrufe Amin al-Husainis aus dem Exil 1940-1945*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2004, pp. 219-224.

⁶⁹ George Lepre, *Himmler’s Bosnian Division*, *op. cit.*, p. 266. We do not know what happened to Abdulah Muhasilović after the war.

⁷⁰ Abdulah Budimlija, *Moja sjećanja*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁷¹ Interview with Fuad Mujakić, former imam of the 13th SS Division, Bihac, 9 May 2010.

⁷² Interview with Adem Gadžo, former imam of the 13th SS Division, Sarajevo, 12 May 2010.

Conclusion

In 1943, top German SS officials sought to rely on Islam to mobilise and radicalise the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, the fact that most of the 20,000 men of the 13th SS Division were recruited by force, and several thousand of them deserted in autumn 1944, shows that this project was largely illusory. Islam was not the “convenient religion” that Heinrich Himmler dreamt it to be. Concretely, the religious elite and institutions initially supported plans for a Muslim SS division, but withdrew their support once it became apparent that this project served mainly German interests. Within the 13th SS Division, military imams were sometimes close to National-Socialist ideology, and took their roles as supervisors and mediators seriously, but they also remained very focused on the specific interests of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. For many of these imams, Islam undoubtedly represented less a warlike political ideology than an ordinary religion, with the war affecting mostly dietary and burial practices. It is hard to know how ordinary soldiers lived their faith during the war, even though religious practice appears to have been fairly weak. In any case, this detailed case study of the 13th SS Division goes against representations of Islam as an invariably warlike religion. It also encourages us to go beyond the question of the political instrumentalisation of Islam by European armies in the 20th century, and to focus on the rationales and religious practices of Muslim combatants in these armies. Assuming that the archives hold materials that can satisfy this curiosity...