

Under Strange Moons: Muslim Soldiers and Contested Meanings of Islam from French North Africa, to the Western Front, Germany, and Beyond – RICHARD S. FOGARTY

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This paper will examine the experiences of French North African soldiers captured by the Germans during the Great War. Placed in a special camp outside Berlin, known as the “Half-moon Camp” in reference to the crescent moon symbol of Islam, these men were the object of an intense propaganda campaign to convince them that Germany and its allies, rather than France and the Entente, represented the true interests of Islam. This meant that Muslim soldiers received special treatment, but it also meant that they were pressured to take up arms against their colonial masters to fight “for Islam” and “against imperialism” in the ranks of the Turkish army. Eventually, about 1,000 North Africans were forced to form a battalion and serve in Mesopotamia, where those who were not killed deserted to British lines at the first opportunity. Back in the custody of French army officers, these men told their stories in interrogations (preserved, but hitherto little-exploited, in France’s military archives) that revealed a great deal about their own understandings of their ethnic, national, and religious identities, as well as the ways Europeans in France and Germany understood these issues. The story of these epic travels and experiences, living and soldiering under several different banners, reveals a great deal about both the strangers and the strange land through which they traveled. The episode also provides unusual perspectives on contested visions of the place of Islam both in the worldwide struggle of the Great War and in the colonial relationship between North Africa and France.