

# The Lost Archive

Missing for a half century, a cache of photos spurs sensitive research on Islam's holy text

By  
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-- *Munich, Germany*



On the night of April 24, 1944, British air force bombers hammered a former Jesuit college here housing the Bavarian Academy of Science. The 16th-century building crumpled in the inferno. Among the treasures lost, later lamented Anton Spitaler, an Arabic scholar at the academy, was a unique photo archive of ancient manuscripts of the Quran.

The 450 rolls of film had been assembled before the war for a bold venture: a study of the evolution of the Quran, the text Muslims view as the verbatim transcript of God's word. The wartime destruction made the project "outright impossible," Mr. Spitaler wrote in the 1970s.

Mr. Spitaler was lying. The cache of photos survived, and he was sitting on it all along. The truth is only now dribbling out to scholars -- and a Quran research project buried for more than 60 years has risen from the grave.

"He pretended it disappeared. He wanted to be rid of it," says Angelika Neuwirth, a former pupil and protégée of the late Mr. Spitaler. Academics who worked with Mr. Spitaler, a powerful figure in postwar German scholarship who died in 2003, have been left guessing why he squirreled away the unusual trove for so long.

Ms. Neuwirth, a professor of Arabic studies at Berlin's Free University, now is overseeing a revival of the research. The project renews a grand tradition of German Quranic scholarship that was interrupted by the Third Reich. The Nazis purged Jewish experts on ancient Arabic texts and compelled Aryan colleagues to serve the war effort. Middle East scholars worked as intelligence officers, interrogators and linguists. Mr. Spitaler himself served, apparently as a translator, in the German-Arab Infantry Battalion 845, a unit of Arab volunteers to the Nazi cause, according to wartime records.

During the 19th century, Germans pioneered modern scholarship of ancient texts. Their work revolutionized understanding of Christian and Jewish scripture. It also infuriated some of the devout, who resented secular scrutiny of texts believed to contain sacred truths.

The revived Quran venture plays into a very modern debate: how to reconcile Islam with the modern world? Academic quarrying of the Quran has produced bold theories, bitter feuds and even claims of an Islamic Reformation in the making. Applying Western critical methods to Islam's holiest text is a sensitive test of the Muslim community's readiness to both accommodate and absorb thinking outside its own traditions.

"It is very exciting," says Patricia Crone, a scholar at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study and a pioneer of unorthodox theories about Islam's early years. She says she first heard that the Munich archive had survived when attending a conference in Germany last fall. "Everyone thought it was destroyed."

The Quran is viewed by most Muslims as the unchanging word of God as transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. The text, they believe, didn't evolve or get edited. The Quran says it is "flawless" and fixed by an "imperishable tablet" in heaven. It starts with a warning: "This book is not to be doubted."

Quranic scholarship often focuses on arcane questions of philology and textual analysis. Experts nonetheless tend to tread warily, mindful of fury directed in recent years at people deemed to have blasphemed Islam's founding document and the Prophet Muhammad.

A scholar in northern Germany writes under the pseudonym of Christoph Luxenberg because, he says, his controversial views on the Quran risk provoking Muslims. He claims that chunks of it were written not in Arabic but in another ancient language, Syriac. The "virgins" promised by the Quran to Islamic martyrs, he asserts, are in fact only "grapes."

Ms. Neuwirth, the Berlin professor now in charge of the Munich archive, rejects the theories of her more radical colleagues, who ride roughshod, she says, over Islamic scholarship. Her aim, she says, isn't to challenge Islam but to "give the Quran the same attention as the Bible." All the same, she adds: "This is a taboo zone."

Ms. Neuwirth says it's too early to have any idea what her team's close study of the cache of early texts and other manuscripts will reveal. Their project, launched last year at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science and Humanities, has state funding for 18 years but could take much longer. The earliest manuscripts of the Quran date from around 700 and use a skeletal version of the Arabic script that is difficult to decipher and can be open to divergent readings.

Mystery and misfortune bedeviled the Munich archive from the start. The scholar who launched it perished in an odd climbing accident in 1933. His successor died in a 1941 plane crash. Mr. Spitaler, who inherited the Quran collection and then hid it, fared better. He lived to age 93.

The rolls of film, kept in cigar boxes, plastic trays and an old cookie tin, are now in a safe in Berlin. The photos of the old manuscripts will form the foundation of a computer data base that Ms. Neuwirth's team believes will help tease out the history of Islam's founding text. The result, says Michael Marx, the project's research director, could be the first "critical edition" of the Quran -- an attempt to divine what the original text looked like and to explore overlaps with the Bible and other Christian and Jewish literature.

A group of Tunisians has embarked on a parallel mission, but they want to keep it quiet to avoid angering fellow Muslims, says Moncef Ben Abdeljelil, a scholar involved in the venture. "Silence is sometimes best," he says. Afghan authorities last year arrested an official involved in a vernacular translation of the Quran that was condemned as blasphemous. Its editor went into hiding.

Many Christians, too, dislike secular scholars boring into sacred texts, and dismiss challenges to certain Biblical passages. But most accept that the Bible was written by different people at different times, and that it took centuries of winnowing before the Christian canon was fixed in its current form.

Muslims, by contrast, view the Quran as the literal word of God. Questioning the Quran "is like telling a Christian that Jesus was gay," says Abdou Filali-Ansary, a Moroccan scholar.

Modern approaches to textual analysis developed in the West are viewed in much of the Muslim world as irrelevant, at best. "Only the writings of a practicing Muslim are worthy of our attention," a university professor in Saudi Arabia wrote in a 2003 book. "Muslim views on the Holy Book must remain firm: It is the Word of Allah, constant, immaculate, unalterable and inimitable."

Ms. Neuwirth, the Berlin Quran expert, and Mr. Marx, her research director, have tried to explain the project to the Muslim world in trips to Iran, Turkey, Syria and Morocco. When a German newspaper trumpeted their work last fall on its front page and predicted that it would "overthrow rulers and topple kingdoms," Mr. Marx called Arab television network al-Jazeera and other media to deny any assault on the tenets of Islam.

Europeans started to study the Quran in the Middle Ages, largely in an effort to debunk it. In the 19th century, faith-driven polemical research gave way to more serious scientific study of old texts. Germans led the way.

Their original focus was the Bible. Priests and rabbis pushed back, but scholars pressed on, challenging traditional views of the Old and New Testaments. Their work undermined faith in the literal truth of scripture and helped birth today's largely secular Europe. Over time, some turned their attention to the Quran, too.

In 1857, a Paris academy offered a prize for the best "critical history" of the Quran. A German, Theodor Nöldeke, won. His entry became the cornerstone of future Western research. Mr. Nöldeke, says Ms. Neuwirth, is "the rock of our church."

The Munich archive began with one of Mr. Nöldeke's protégés, Gotthelf Bergsträsser. As Germany slid towards fascism early last century, he hunted down old copies of the Quran in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. He took photographs of them with a Leica camera.

In 1933, a few months after Hitler became chancellor, Mr. Bergsträsser, an experienced climber, died in the Bavarian Alps. His body was never given an autopsy; rumors spread of suicide or foul play.

His work was taken up by Otto Pretzl, another German Arabist. He too set off with a Leica. In a 1934 journey to Morocco, he wangled his way into a royal library containing an old copy of the Quran and won over initially suspicious clerics, he said in a handwritten report about his trip.

The Nazis began to use Arabists early in the war when German forces began pushing into regions with large Muslim populations, first North Africa and then the Soviet Union. Scholars were used to broadcast propaganda and to help set up mullah schools for Muslims recruited into the German armed forces.

Mr. Pretzl, the manuscript collector, appears to have worked largely in military intelligence. He interrogated Arabic-speaking soldiers captured in the invasion of France, then, according to some accounts, set off on a mission to stir up an Arab uprising against British troops in Iraq. His plane crashed.

Responsibility for the Quran archive fell to Mr. Spitaler, who had helped collect some of the photos. During the war, Mr. Spitaler served in the command offices in Germany and later as an Arabic linguist in Austria, gaining only a modest military rank, records indicate.

After the war, he returned to academia. Instead of reviving the Quran project, he embarked on a laborious but less-sensitive endeavor, a dictionary of classical Arabic. After nearly half a century of work, definitions were published only for words beginning with two letters of the 28-letter Arabic alphabet.

Mr. Spitaler rarely published papers, but was widely admired for his mastery of Arabic texts. A few scholars, however, judged him overly cautious, unproductive and hostile to unconventional views.

"The whole period after 1945 was poisoned by the Nazis," says Günter Lüling, a scholar who was drummed out of his university in the 1970s after he put forward heterodox theories about the Quran's origins. His doctoral thesis argued that the Quran was lifted in part from Christian hymns. Blackballed by Mr. Spitaler, Mr. Lüling lost his

teaching job and launched a fruitless six-year court battle to be reinstated. Feuding over the Quran, he says, "ruined my life."

He wrote books and articles at home, funded by his wife, who took a job in a pharmacy. Asked by a French journal to write a paper on German Arabists, Mr. Lüling went to Berlin to examine wartime records. Germany's prominent postwar Arabic scholars, he says, "were all connected to the Nazis."

Berthold Spuler, for example, translated Yiddish and Hebrew for the Gestapo, says Mr. Lüling. (Mr. Spuler's subsequent teaching career ran into trouble in the 1960s when, during a Hamburg student protest, he shouted that the demonstrators "belong in a concentration camp.") Rudi Paret, who in 1962 produced what became the standard German translation of the Quran, was listed as a member of "The Institute for Research on and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life." Despite their wartime activities, the subsequent work of such scholars is still highly regarded. By the mid-1970s, Mr. Spitaler in Munich was nearing retirement at the university there. He began moving boxes into a room set aside for the dictionary project at Bavaria's Academy of Sciences. His last doctoral student in Munich, Kathrin Müller, who was working on the dictionary, says she looked inside one of the boxes and saw old film. She asked Mr. Spitaler what it was but didn't get an answer. The boxes, she now realizes, contained the old Quran archive. "He didn't want to explain anything," she says.



In the early 1980s, when the archive was still thought to be lost, two German scholars traveled to Yemen to examine and help restore a cache of ancient Quran manuscripts. They, too, took pictures. When they tried to get them out of Yemen, authorities seized them, says Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, one of the scholars. German diplomats finally persuaded Yemen to release most of the photos, he says.

Mr. Puin says the manuscripts suggested to him that the Quran "didn't just fall from heaven" but "has a history." When he said so publicly a decade ago, it stirred rage. "Please ensure that these scholars are not given further access to the documents," read one letter to the Yemen Times. "Allah, help us against our enemies." Berlin Quran expert Ms. Neuwirth, though widely regarded as respectful of Islamic tradition, got sideswiped by Arab suspicion of Western scholars. She was fired from a teaching post in Jordan, she says, for mentioning a radical revisionist scholar during a lecture in Germany.

Around 1990, Ms. Neuwirth met Mr. Spitaler, her old professor, in Berlin. He was in his 80s and growing frail, but remained sharp mentally. He "got sentimental about the old times," recalls Ms. Neuwirth. As they talked, he casually mentioned that he still had the photo archive. He offered to give it to her. "I had heard it didn't exist," she says. She later sent two of her students to Munich to collect the photo cache and bring it to Berlin.

The news didn't spread beyond a small circle of scholars. When Mr. Spitaler died in 2003, Paul Kunitzsch, a fellow Munich Arabist, wrote an obituary recounting how the archive had been lost, torpedoing the Quran project. Such a venture, he wrote, "now appears totally out of the question" because of "the attitude of the Islamic world to such a project."

Information about the archive's survival has just begun trickling out to the wider scholarly community. Why Mr. Spitaler hid it remains a mystery. His only published mention of the archive's fate was a footnote to an article in a 1975 book on the Quran. Claiming the bulk of the cache had been lost during the war, he wrote cryptically that "drastically changed conditions after 1945" ruled out any rebuilding of the collection.



Ms. Neuwirth, the current guardian of the archive, believes that perhaps Mr. Spitaler was simply "sick of" the time-consuming project and wanted to move on to other work. Mr. Lüling has a less charitable theory: that Mr. Spitaler didn't have the talents needed to make use of the archive himself and wanted to make sure colleagues couldn't outshine him by working on the material.

Mr. Kunitzsch, the obituary author, says he's mystified by Mr. Spitaler's motives. He speculates that his former colleague decided that the Quran manuscript project was simply too ambitious. The task, says Mr. Kunitzsch, grew steadily more sensitive as Muslim hostility towards Western scholars escalated, particularly after the founding of Israel in 1948. "He knew that for Arabs, [the Quran] was a closed matter."

Ms. Müller, Mr. Spitaler's last doctoral student, says the war "was a deep cut for everything" and buried the prewar dreams

of many Germans. Another possible factor, she adds, was Mr. Spitaler's own deep religious faith. She opens up a copy of a Quran used by the late professor, a practicing Catholic, until his death. Unlike his other Arabic texts, which are scrawled with notes and underlinings, it has no markings at all.

"Perhaps he had too much respect for holy books," says Ms. Müller.