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Influencing
Ephemeral Publics in States of Emergency

The rise of global publics empowered ordinary people and made rulers nervous. It is hard to govern publics that are connected, opinionated, and know how to seek information. In states of emergency in particular—such as during wars, pandemics, and natural disasters, when the thirst for information is high and access to information is limited—things become more complicated. It was true in the late nineteenth century when modern media started to appear, and it is true in today's age of digital communication. The instruments for influencing the public are not always conventional media that the state could or can use, seize, or control. In our digital age, anyone can spread information—and misinformation and disinformation—with few barriers. In a space where everyone is a publisher, news is improvised, fluid, and interactive and the line between producers and consumers of information is blurry. This is an ephemeral public. Content moderation, the practice of policing this unruly public, often fails. Neither ephemeral publics nor the struggle to police them is a novel phenomenon. In states of emergency, throughout modern history, the world went through similar phases of contentious public-making when trying to control information was like catching wind by hand.

One of the biggest states of emergency in the twentieth century was World War I. It was deadly, destructive, and truly global. It coincided with the rise of modern means of communication that created what Huber and Osterhammel have called "global publics."[1] As a concept, the global publics is a departure from the Habermasian public sphere and instead explores the geographies and processes of information circulation on a transnational scale. In 1914, when the Great War in Europe broke out, the infrastructures of global publics had already been established. The warring parties had little difficulty in getting their messages across and trying to influence the many competing forms of publics that existed around the world. The informational aspect of the war was particularly important in countries that remained neutral or lacked robust infrastructures of communication. Afghanistan, for example, attracted a fair amount of attention from European powers because it was both neutral and had a population that was largely illiterate, rendering modern media ineffective. How do you influence public opinion in a country where few can read? The Central Powers' attempts to win over the Muslim world offer some lessons in the tactical use of an ephemeral medium: rumor.

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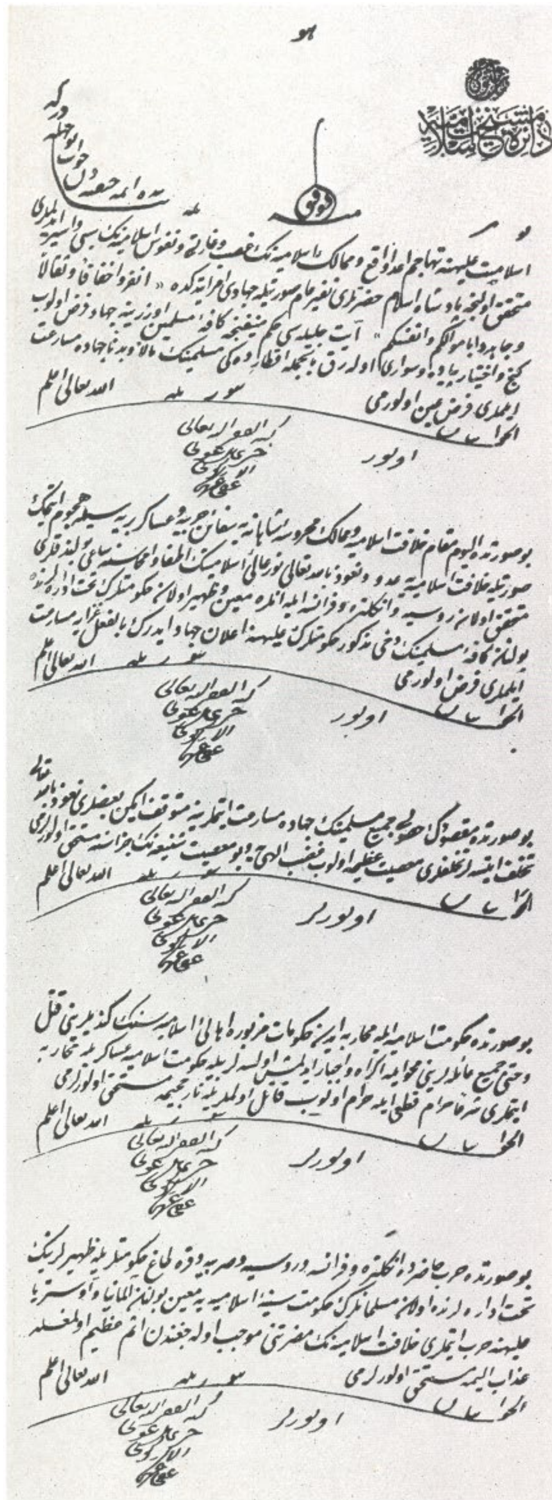

Figure 13. During World War I, Germany asked its Muslim ally, the Ottoman caliph, to issue a fatwa of jihad to mobilize Muslims against the British and the Russians. On November 14, 1914, the fatwa was issued but the task of spreading it across the Muslim world proved more difficult. Wikimedia Commons.

Not long after the war started, the Ottoman caliph, at the request of Germany, issued a call for jihad to mobilize the Muslims of the world against the British and the Russians.[2] This was an ambitious call, especially coming from, on the one hand, a decaying caliphate that was on its last legs, and, on the other, a Christian country. The biggest challenge of this fatwa, however, was to circulate it in a world that was mostly controlled by Allied countries. The Central Powers dispatched jihad provocateurs to several major Muslim nations, mostly in clandestine missions, betraying the fact that the fatwa was more of (what we now call) a psychological operation than a religious ruling. They particularly focused on Afghanistan, because it had shared borders with the British and Russian Empires and a population that, they thought, would take little persuasion to fight their neighbors. The German mission (1915–1916), led by Oskar von Niedermayer and Werner Otto von Hentig, two army officers, remained in Afghanistan for several months.[3] The holy war campaign faced the immediate barrier of widespread illiteracy in the Islamic world, which made written propaganda useless. As a result, a big part of the campaign was focused on oral dissemination of the call for jihad and spreading sensational pro-German stories that would be transmitted in bazaars. In other words, they targeted ephemeral publics.

Illiteracy was a worldwide concern in the first half of the twentieth century, as Huber shows in her essay in this *AHR* History Lab forum.[4] Without a literate public, fixed forms of information—like the text of a fatwa—could not be distributed widely. Mass media such as newspapers were vital in the formation of discursive global publics, connecting diverse areas of the world through the printed word.[5] The logistics of circulating material media during a state of emergency meant that textual public-making was not always easy. In contrast, the information that circulated orally was usually fluid and interactive and did not require external storage. In addition, the ephemerality of oral publics made them elusive and hard to control by the state, which was convenient for adversaries spreading misinformation. In World War I, the Germans and Ottomans did not just circulate their call for jihad; they also employed oral genres of communication, such as rumors, to target ephemeral publics in the Islamic world. The most widespread pro-German rumor that they propagated was the story about the conversion of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his people to Islam. The German intelligence service even came up with a new name for the emperor: Hajji Wilhelm Mohammed.[6]

The bazaars across the Islamic world soon "were buzzing" with the rumor of the emperor's conversion, and, as the story traveled, more elaborate details were added to it. People picked passages from the Qur'an saying that they showed "the Kaiser had been ordained by God to free Muslims from infidel rule."[7] The German Foreign Office had set up an Oriental Intelligence Unit, staffed with orientalists, native Muslims from Persia, Turkey, India, and North Africa, and eleven

translators. The Persians working there were ʻIzzat Allah Khan Hidayat, Hasan Taqizadah, and Husain Kazimzadah, who were responsible for *Kavah*, the Persian version of *El Dschihad*, the newspaper that the unit produced in multiple languages for Muslim countries.[8] The Oriental Intelligence Unit produced 5,266 different magazines and newspapers in multiple languages tailored for each country and even published illustrated materials for the illiterate. In 1915 alone, their total output reached 2.5 million items.[9] Print materials were difficult to distribute. Afghanistan, which was one of the three sovereign Muslim countries in the world besides Persia and Ottoman Turkey, was run by a pro-British ruler who did not tolerate German and Ottoman propaganda.[10] In Persia, the shah banned the publication of the jihad proclamation.[11] The Central Powers, as a result, had limited options for reaching the Muslim public. Their best tool was rumor—an ephemeral medium that was easy to spread and hard to control.

The global call for jihad also tested the strength of the *ummah* (the universal Muslim community), which was perceived by German planners of the holy war to be a networked public that moved in concert when it came to religious causes. In other words, this was an experiment in forming a globalized public that was connected by faith and modern means of communication. The idea of waging a global jihad was based on the advice of Germany's leading Islamic scholars and orientalists, like Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, who believed Muslims were one single politico-religious community. Oppenheim held an influential position at the German Foreign Office, where he drafted a 136-page policy paper proposing the German-Ottoman alliance. One of the key components of this paper was the propagation of jihad in Muslim lands, but also "in their own languages."[12] Kaiser Wilhelm II supported this proposal and said he wanted to bring "the whole Mohammedan world in a wild revolt."[13] This was how the emperor asked the Ottoman sultan to issue a jihad proclamation.

The Central Powers targeted communication infrastructures that were integral to the formation of ephemeral publics among Muslims, such as the hajj, the bazaar, and the mosque. In 1914, Max Roloff-Breslau, a German intelligence officer, disguised himself as a Muslim and got an Indonesian hajj-bound ship. His mission was to spread pro-German rumors among the pilgrims because they could each serve as a medium circulating the messages at the hajj ceremony among people who came from all corners of the Islamic world.[14] After the hajj, each pilgrim would take the rumors to their home country and spread German propaganda, which the states in question would be unable to stop. The hajj, as result, was a globalizing institution that served as a network node in spreading information that could influence the opinions and behaviors of people otherwise separated by geography and ideology.[15] Another social space that attracted a great deal of attention from German and Ottoman propagandists was the mosque. The mosque, where Muslims came together regularly for daily prayer, was viewed as an

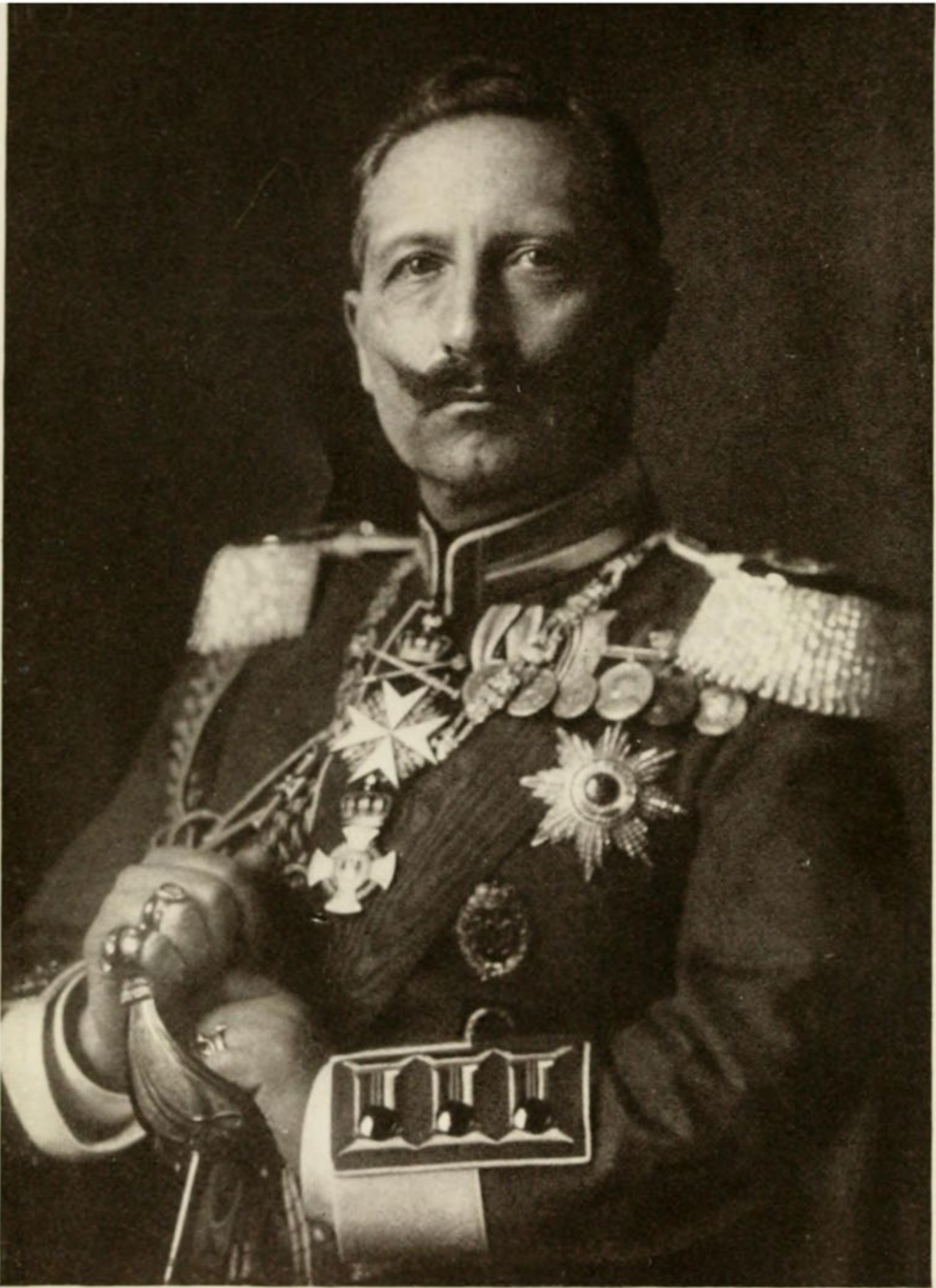

Figure 14. In World War I, German intelligence put enormous efforts into propagating the call for jihad among Muslims. They used every media of communication available, including rumors. One sensational rumor that traveled the farthest was the story of the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, converting to Islam. Wikimedia Commons.

ideal space for spreading information. In Persia, they persuaded the chief mullah of Tehran to spread pro-German ideas in his sermons at the mosque and asked him to encourage other mullahs to do the same.[16]

The rumor of the kaiser's conversion soon reached the volatile areas on the Afghan-Indian borderlands. The British officials in India became nervous about the call for jihad among Afghans and the effects of the rumor about Hajji Wilhelm. Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy of India, wrote to the amir to say that the Germans were actively spreading rumors that Emperor Wilhelm II and his people have converted to Islam. "Such stories," he added, "could not possibly find credence with the educated people of Afghanistan." [17] This was a polite reminder to the amir that he should prevent the spread of the rumors and remember that the British government was paying him an annual subsidy for a reason. The amir listened. He issued a decree across the country that partly said, "If anyone expressed the intention of *ghaza* [another word for jihad] or praised the Germans, his tongue would be cut out."[18] He did such a good job of controlling information circulation that, a year into the war, when an Indian visited the eastern city of Jalalabad, he noticed that no one had heard of the Great War yet—or they claimed they did not know about the war.[19]

This story of Kaiser Wilhelm II's embrace of Islam was a perfect rumor: it was sensational, plausible, and hard to verify for an average Muslim. The craftsmanship of the story alone, however, was only one reason why it turned into a global sensation across the Islamic world. The other reason was the political climate in Muslim countries, which welcomed a movement that could unite a Muslim community that at the time felt defeated and weak. This is a feature of any global public, even ephemeral ones. As Huber and Osterhammel have argued, "publics are seldom completely passive and manipulated." They operate by "active participation by actors whose motives, abilities, and determination differ, but who share a commitment to non-violent exchange."[20] In an article titled "Germany and the Islamic World," the Afghan newspaper *Siraj al-Akhbar* expressed the resentment that Pan-Islamists of the time felt toward colonial powers. "A thousand years after its emergence, Islam still had a land mass of 28 million *farsakh*s [about 156 million square kilometers], but now it has been reduced to three countries of Ottoman, Persia, and Afghanistan and every other part of it is occupied by this or that foreign state."[21] The Pan-Islamists did not hate the idea of a global uprising against the British and the Russians. They were not necessarily in love with Germany, but they viewed pro-German propaganda as an anticolonial movement.

Germany's clandestine jihad campaign did not materialize in the end. It was a lofty goal. Nevertheless, it crucially contributed to the idea of modern global jihadism.[22] What lived on from the First World War was the struggle to influence ephemeral publics. In the next world war, for example, the warring parties viewed the task of influencing public opinion as a key part of the battle. In the United States, rumors became such a major problem that some cities set up "rumor clinics," where volunteers would help people separate facts from fiction.[23] The US government, like most other governments engaged in the war, even suspended

privacy laws to intercept letters handled by the post office.[24] This was, to use a contemporary term, content moderation: a form of policing speech for safeguarding wartime military secrets and containing enemy propaganda.

The most recent state of emergency was related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdowns and the initial uncertainty about the nature of the virus and how it spread gave rise to conspiracy theories, rumors, and misinformation. The way pandemic rumors spread uncontrollably on social media was not much different from how rumors during the First World War, such as the German emperor's alleged embrace of Islam, transmitted around the Muslim world through word of mouth. Both created ephemeral global publics. The ephemerality in the digital age stems from the structure of the publics that social media platforms create: everyone can freely publish information, and the algorithms reward the most sensational stories. In the pre-digital age, stories that people exchanged in bazaars, mosques, caravanserais, and other public forums maintained the same ephemeral quality, and only the shocking ones attracted the greatest attention. In short, ephemeral information targets people's emotions and creates publics that are uncertain and unruly.

At times of emergency, such as pandemics and wars, public-making becomes more contentious. What are the limits of free speech in such times? Who should be the arbiter of facts? Is it possible to police harmful speech without falling for illiberal tendencies? These questions are likely to remain relevant—both in times of war and in times of peace.

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21 *Siraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 4 (1333 AH/1914), no. 8, 10.
22 Some consider the 1979 soviet invasion of Afghanistan and America's "covert" support of Islamic fundamentalists to fight the Soviets as the birth of modern global jihadism. Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 2–8. In the 1980s, the US government funded, among others, school textbooks for Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan—the base of CIA-backed mujahidin—that promoted armed jihad. Joe Stephens and David B. Ottaway, "From U.S., the ABC's of Jihad," *Washington Post*, March 23, 2002, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/03/23/from-us-the-abcs-of-jihad/d079075a-3ed3-4030-9a96-0d48f6355e54/. It was, one could argue, Germany's World War 1 efforts to incite a global armed jihad against non-Muslims that truly started modern jihadism. The work of the Oriental Intelligence Unit was not as excessive, or expensive, as the CIA's jihad operations in the 1980s, but it was the first modern push for organized Islamic militancy as the Muslim world's response to the West. Both programs had a lot in common when it came to the rhetoric of their propaganda, but there was one big difference: Germany's jihad did not work out, but America's did—it worked too well, in fact, because, at least in Afghanistan, the war mujahidin started is still taking lives.
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