

SPULER, Bertold

(1911-1990), German scholar of East European history and Oriental studies.

SPULER, Bertold (b. Karlsruhe, Germany, 5 December 1911; d. Hamburg, 6 March 1990), scholar of East European history and Oriental studies ([FIGURE 1](#)). Among his many publications are important works on the history of the Iranian lands from the 7th century CE onwards.

Spuler spent his childhood and youth in Karlsruhe, a provincial capital in southwest Germany. The city served until 1918 as the seat of the Grand-Duchy of Baden. His father Rudolf (Theodor, as claimed by Göckenjan, p. 1, is an error) Spuler (1875-1956) was an ophthalmologist. His mother, the former Natalena Lindner (1879-1966), had been raised in Silesia, most of which is today part of Poland. The family belonged to the Old Catholic Church which rejected the doctrine of papal infallibility and had therefore split from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1870s. Spuler was an active member of the Old Catholic Church throughout his life (Busse, p. 204).

As a teenager Spuler lived through the economic and political turmoils of the 1920s which followed the German defeat in World War I. He received a humanist education, with a focus on Latin and Greek, at the Bismarck Gymnasium in Karlsruhe. Spuler had a remarkable facility in picking up languages, and so he learned as a schoolboy Russian, Polish, and Hebrew, as well as French, English, Italian, and Spanish. Later he became fluent in Arabic, Persian, as well as Ottoman and Republican Turkish. From 1930 until 1935, in the traditional manner of the time, Spuler studied at several German universities to obtain a thorough education in Classical philology, history, Slavic languages, and Islamic studies. He began his studies in Heidelberg (1930-31), moved on to Munich (1931-33), though he spent the summer term of 1932 in Hamburg, and concluded his academic training in Breslau (Wrocław, Poland). Among his teachers in Islamic studies were Gotthelf Bergsträsser (1886-1933; cf. Ellinger, p. 468), Rudolf Strothmann (1877-1960; cf. Spuler, 1961; Rohde, pp. 134-40), and Carl Brockelmann (1868-1956; cf. Spuler, 1958; Sellheim; Ellinger, pp. 444). At the age of 24 Spuler defended in Breslau his doctoral dissertation on European diplomacy in Istanbul until the 1739 peace treaty between the Habsburg and the Ottoman empires. His thesis was supervised by Friedrich Andreae (1879-1939), a specialist of Silesian history. Andreae's impact on Spuler's interest in cultural history remains to be studied (cf. Andreae's use of European literary sources for his 1908 study of the 18th century perception of China).

In 1934, the Historical Committee of Silesia (*Historische Kommission für Schlesien*) employed Spuler as research assistant (*Referent*) of Polish literature. After his graduation from the University of Breslau in 1935, he became *Hochschulassistent* at the Institute for the Study of Eastern Europe at the University of Berlin. In 1937 Spuler left Berlin for the position of *Hochschulassistent* to Walther Hinz (1908-1992; cf. Schmitt; Grüttner, pp. 75-76; Ellinger, p. 491) who had just been appointed to the Middle Eastern studies chair (*ordentlicher Professor für Geschichte und Kultur des Vorderen Orients*) at the University of Göttingen (Hanisch, 2003, p. 135).

Like Spuler, Hinz had started out as a historian of Eastern Europe, writing at the University of Leipzig a doctoral dissertation about the policies of Tsar Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725) toward the states bordering the Caspian Sea. Subsequently Hinz concentrated on the history of Iran, and wrote a second, more extensive dissertation (*Habilitation*) at the University of Berlin, while serving as advisor for the Ministry of Education (*Reichserziehungsministerium*). Spuler followed Hinz' example by devoting more attention to Islamic studies in general and Iranian history in particular. Hinz worked with Spuler and other young colleagues on an annotated translation of the chapter about Safavid Iran in *Amoenitatum*

exoticarum politico-physico-mediciarum fasciculi V (Lemgo, 1712) by [Engelbert Kaempfer](#) (1651-1716). In 1938 Spuler completed his *Habilitation* on the history of the [Il-khanids](#) in Iran between 1220 and 1350, and was granted the licence to teach university courses in the fields of Oriental and Islamic studies. Between 1955 and 1985 Spuler published three revised editions of this study which was also translated into Republican Turkish and Persian. The impact of his book on contemporary research on the Mongols remains to be studied.

After the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Spuler was drafted as soldier into the German army. At this time he was teaching as *Privatdozent* at the University of Göttingen, waiting for a university appointment as tenured professor. Throughout the war, he remained a university employee who was granted a leave of absence from his academic teaching obligations. In 1942 the University of Munich offered him the chair (*ordentlicher Professor*) of Semitic philology and Islamic studies (Hanisch, 1995, pp. 221, 225 no. 43). He was officially appointed to this position in 1943, though he never effectively assumed his duties. After the war, in May 1945, Spuler was discharged as private (*Gefreiter*, cf. Hoffmann, p. 140).

Spuler was first deployed as interpreter in Poland and then transferred to the Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*) in Berlin where the young Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003; cf. Ellinger, pp. 525-26) was among his Orientalist colleagues (Ellinger, p. 191; Hanisch, 2003, p. 160 no. 570). In 1942 Spuler published a study about the peoples and states between the Volga and Ural rivers, exploring how from 1553 until the mid-19th century the Kazan-Tartars and the Bashkirs fared under Russian rule (Spuler, 1942, pp. 7-8; cf. Ellinger, pp. 263, 335-36, 352). The book supplements his 1943 study about the [Golden Horde](#) in Russia between 1223 and 1502 (Ellinger, pp. 353-54). Spuler combined in both books his original interest in Eastern Europe with his new-found focus on Asian history, which would remain an important area of inquiry within the extraordinary range of his diverse scholarly work. After the German defeat at Stalingrad (Volgograd, Russia) in February 1943, the German army intensified its efforts to recruit Muslim volunteers from the Soviet Union, since Islam was perceived as one of the sources of resistance against communism (Hanisch, 2003, pp. 162-63). Spuler advised the Armed Forces High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) on Turkish matters (Hanisch, 1995, pp. 223, 226 no. 61; 2003, p. 164 no. 588). In 1944 he organized in Göttingen six training courses for Muslim army chaplains (*Mulla-Lehrgänge*, lit. “molla courses”; cf. Hoffmann, pp. 139-40; Berlin, as claimed by Marchand, p. 295, is an error) who were prisoners of war (POWs) or deserters (for the recruitment of Soviet POWs, see Hoffmann, pp. 77-92; Höpp and Reinwald, pp. 143-88; Snyder).

After the German surrender in May 1945, the Allies screened the entire adult population. Spuler’s denazification (*Entnazifizierung*) was closed with the official notification of 4 August 1949 in which he was exonerated (*unbelastet*; Thomas Franke, Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv, email, 6 August 2009). During this time Spuler taught as adjunct professor Islamic studies courses in Göttingen and at the University of Hamburg (official full-time university employment as *Privatdozent*, as claimed by Busse, p. 203, and others, is not documented; Ulrich Hunger, Universitätsarchiv Göttingen, emails, 31 July and 3 August 2009). In 1948 he became the chair of Islamic studies (*Islamwissenschaft*) at the University of Hamburg, where he remained until his retirement in 1980. From 1953 onwards, he also served as professor of Semitic languages. It speaks to his administrative skills that he managed to create academic positions for the Turkologist [Annemarie von Gabain](#) (1901-93) and the Iranian studies scholar Wolfgang Lentz (1900-86), as well as for the Egyptologist Wolfgang Helck (1914-93). Subsequently his colleagues established their disciplines as independent departments at the University of Hamburg. Spuler was an active member of the German Oriental Society (*Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*, DMG; [FIGURE 2](#)), and worked for the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, DFG). For many years he belonged to the selection committee of the Giorgio Levi Della Vida Award that his friend Gustave von

Grunebaum (1909-72; cf. Spuler, 1972) had established at the Center for the Near Eastern Studies of the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA). In the late 1960s, when the University of Hamburg reformed the organization of both teaching and research Spuler became an outspoken conservative critic of these institutional changes (Busse, p. 204; cf. Rohde, pp. 141-42). Nonetheless, in 1972 he declined the Austrian offer of a chair at the University of Vienna (*Hamburger Abendblatt*, 17 March 1972; cf. Busse, p. 204).

The universities of Ankara, Istanbul, Bordeaux, Baghdad, and Kabul, as well as UCLA and the Collège de France in Paris invited Spuler as visiting professor. In 1962 and 1965 the universities of Bern (Switzerland) and Bordeaux (France), respectively, awarded him honorary doctorates. Among his collaborators and students were the Turkologists Hanna Sohrweide (1919-84), Barbara Flemming (b. 1930), Klaus Röhrborn (b. 1938), Suraiya Faroqhi (b. 1941), and Petra Kappert (1945-2004), the Islamic historians Heribert Busse (b. 1926), Werner Ende (b. 1937), and Angelika Hartmann (b. 1944), the ethnomusicologist Gabriele Braune (b. 1955), as well as the art historians Janine Sourdél-Thomine, Heinz Gaube (b. 1940), and Claus-Peter Haase (b. 1944).

In 1948, when Spuler became the successor of his teacher Strothmann, he also became one of the editors of the renowned journal *Der Islam*. Carl Heinrich Becker (1876-1933) had founded the journal in 1910, while he was professor at the Institute of Colonial Studies (*Kolonialinstitut*) in Hamburg, and its editorship is still one of the traditional responsibilities of the Islamic studies chair at the University of Hamburg (Rohde, p. 129). After Strothmann's death in 1960, Spuler served as the journal's sole editor, writing *inter alia* an enormous number of book reviews. From 1980 onwards Spuler shared the responsibility for *Der Islam* with his successor Albrecht Noth (1937-99). Spuler also served on the editorial board of *Saeculum* (Freiburg/Breisgau, 1-, 1950-), an annual journal of world history. In 1952 Brill published the first volume of the *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, a monumental series of oriental studies monographs; Spuler held the position of its founding editor until 1989 (Johansen, pp. 93, 106). In 1990, shortly before his death, he arranged the sale of his private library. The books were eventually purchased by the International Islamic University Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, which also owns the private libraries of Robert Brunschvig, Oleg Grabar, Fazlur Rahman, Joseph Schacht, and Max Weisweiler (Wolf-Gazo, p. 293; Wakin, pp. 10-11). Spuler was survived by his wife, the former Gerda Röhrig (1908-2002), and their children Christof (b. 1942), Thomas (b. 1945), and Hanna (b. 1948). His wife was a librarian. Christof Spuler is an art historian, who for many years was the director of the International Newspaper Museum (*Internationales Zeitungsmuseum*) in Aachen (Germany). The Turkologist Ursula Spuler-Stegemann (b. 1939) is his great-niece, and, strictly speaking, not his student. She currently holds an unsalaried professorship (*Honorarprofessur*) in the Religious Studies Department of the Philipps-Universität Marburg (Germany).

Spuler's preoccupation with Asian history is reflected in his *magnum opus* about the history of the Iranian lands from the Arab conquest of the 7th century CE to the Saljuq conquest of the 11th century CE. Spuler published this book in 1952, and its Persian translation by 'Abd-al-Jawād Falāṭuri (1926-96) has been in print since 1970. Spuler was also deeply interested in the history of Christianity in Eastern Europe and the Near East, collecting information about recent developments in the Eastern churches, as well as in smaller Christian denominations in the Near East in general and in Iran in particular. Between 1939 and 1989, the *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* (Bern, Switzerland) published twice a year his report about current developments, a total of 100 reports during a period of 50 years. In 1948 he published a handbook of Eastern churches, which was reissued in an updated version in 1968.

The mastery of Slavic languages was a valuable aid to Spuler's research on the Islamic lands (Dietrich, p. 379), and in the late 1940s Slavists still considered him a historian of Eastern Europe (Mehnert, p. 193).

But already in 1955 Bernard Lewis (p. 399) observed that Spuler had convincingly established that Orientalists could ill afford to ignore scholarship published in Slavic languages. Despite his extraordinary mastery of a great number of languages, Spuler was first and foremost a historian, and not a philologist (Busse, p. 204). While he was interested in the study of proper names (onomastics), he insisted that the linguistic evidence of proper names and titles did not provide sufficient evidence for people's national identity (e.g., Spuler, 1957). Colleagues praised him for his ability to draw on a wide range of diverse sources to construct a historical survey based on that which Grunebaum described as "external facts" (p. 202). This positivist approach ensured that in his scholarly publications Spuler carefully documented his sources in extensive footnotes, thus also facilitating the reader's access to this material (Jäschke, pp. 194-95; Dietrich, p. 379). The enormous amount of presented data, however, prompted some reviewers early on to wonder whether books like *Iran in früh-islamischer Zeit* also demonstrated the limits of his descriptive method (Dietrich, p. 379; cf. Busse, pp. 202-3).

Spuler was one of the most eminent contributors to the study of Islamic Iran in the second half of the 20th century. Unlike his mentor Hinz, Spuler never accepted the idea that the history of the Iranian lands from the 7th century onwards could be studied outside the framework of an Islamic history, and he strongly defended the notion of an all-encompassing Islamic civilization. Since he perceived Iran, Central Asia, and parts of the Indian subcontinent as Islamic lands, he opposed intellectual trends that present the central Arab lands as the undisputed core of Islamic civilization, while marginalizing Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia as regions on the edge of the Arab-Islamic world. His contribution to the knowledge of Iranian history within the realm of Islamic civilization can hardly be overestimated.

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It is not known whether Spuler himself made any personal arrangements for the deposition of his personal papers. Records for his academic career are preserved in Göttingen, Munich, and Hamburg. Diverse documents for Spuler's years at the University of Göttingen from 1936 until 1948 are held in the University Archives (*Universitätsarchiv Göttingen*, cf. <http://wwwuser.gwdg.de/~uniarch/>). The University Archive of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich <http://www.universitaetsarchiv.uni-muenchen.de/index.html> keeps all records concerning his 1943 appointment, covering the years 1939-47. The University of Hamburg preserves Spuler's personnel files (*Personalakte*) for the years 1947-69 with the shelfmark IV 2553 in the city's State Archives (*Staatsarchiv Hamburg*, cf. <http://www.hamburg.de/staatsarchiv/>) s.v. *Hochschulwesen: Dozenten- und Personalakten*.

Inquiries about records of Spuler's military service should be directed to the German Information Office (*Deutsche Dienststelle*; cf. <http://www.dd-wast.de/>) in Berlin, while inquiries related to his NSDAP membership (cf. Ellinger, pp. 36-37, esp. n. 130) need be directed to the department *Abteilung Deutsches Reich (R)* of the German Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv*; cf. http://www.bundesarchiv.de/aufgaben_organisation/abteilungen/reich/index.html), which is also located in Berlin. Access to these documents, however, is restricted.

Copies of Spuler's reports about the 1944 molla courses (cf. the bibliography in J. Hoffmann, *Die Ostlegionen*, 1976, pp. 183-84 s.v. Spuler) are kept in the Hoffmann bequest of the Military Archive of the German Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv*, cf. http://www.bundesarchiv.de/aufgaben_organisation/dienstorte/freiburg/index.html) under the

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Originally Published: September 17, 2010

Last Updated: September 17, 2010