

75 years since the Kristallnacht pogrom in Nazi Germany

By Peter Schwarz
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Starting on the night of November 9, 1938, a total of 1,400 synagogues were set ablaze across Germany. Thousands of Jewish businesses were destroyed, homes looted, people attacked and cemeteries desecrated. Approximately 30,000 Jews were locked up in concentration camps and around 1,500 murdered.

The November pogroms did not mark the beginning of the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany—which began immediately after the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor in January 1933—but the transition from discrimination against Jewish citizens to their systematic persecution. Three years later it culminated in their organized extermination.

The Nazis took great pains to present the November pogroms as a spontaneous outburst of popular outrage in response to the shooting of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris on November 7 by the 17-year-old Herschel Grynszpan. In fact the pogroms were planned and organized at the highest levels of the party and the state.

Hitler and the entire party leadership were assembled in Munich to mark the anniversary of the Hitler-Ludendorff putsch of November 9, 1923 when Rath died two days after he was attacked. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels then personally incited anti-Semitic sentiments in a radio address.

Already the day before, the *Völkische Beobachter* had given directions. “It is intolerable that within our borders hundreds of thousands of Jews still dominate entire shopping malls, places of entertainment and pocket the money of German tenants as ‘foreign’ house owners, while their fellow Jews abroad agitate for war with Germany and shoot down German officials,” the Nazi paper wrote.

After Goebbels’ speech, Nazi officials and SA leaders present in Munich gave instructions to the local party organizations. Goebbels’ Propaganda Ministry sent telegrams to district authorities and the Gestapo, who in turn instructed their subordinates.

One order to the “North Sea” SA office reads: “All Jewish stores are to be immediately destroyed by SA men in uniform. [...] Jewish synagogues are to be immediately put on fire, Jewish symbols should be confiscated. The fire department may not intervene. [...] The Führer wishes the police not to intervene. All Jews are to be disarmed. Shoot on sight at any sign of resistance. Signs are to be hung over the destroyed Jewish shops, synagogues etc. with the following text: Revenge for the murder of vom Rath. Death to international Jewry. No compromise with people who are

Jews.”

Overnight commenced a wave of unprecedented terror against the Jewish population. An eyewitness report from Nuremberg, cited by the historian Jörg Wollenberg in the book “Niemand war dabei und keiner hat’s gewusst” (“No one was there, and no one knew about it”), describes what took place in many cities:

“First, the big stores were attacked; the windows were smashed with poles, and a mob which had been notified in the evening before ransacked the stores under the leadership of the SA. Next on the list were the houses inhabited by Jews. [...]

“Many of the ‘spontaneous’ avengers were equipped with revolvers and daggers, each group had the necessary tools for burglary, such as axes, big hammers and crowbars. Some SA men were carrying a haversack to hoard money, jewelry, photographs and other valuables which they could take away. [...]

“Glass doors, mirrors and pictures were taken, oil paintings cut out with daggers, bedding, shoes, clothes slashed, everything was beaten to small pieces. On the morning of November 10, the families affected usually found themselves without a mug, spoon or knife, with nothing. Any sums of money found were confiscated, securities and savings books taken away. The worst of all were the severe attacks on householders, where women were abused as often as men.”

Onlookers assembled at the scene of the pogroms, cheering on the perpetrators or taking part themselves in the looting. In rural areas, members of the Hitler Youth were involved in the abuse. Overall, however, the response of the general population was characterized mainly by passivity, mixed with horror and rejection.

This is documented, amongst other sources, by unpublished reports of diplomats stationed in Germany, which the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs has assembled to mark the 75th Anniversary of the pogroms. They are currently on display at the New Synagogue on Oranienburger Straße in Berlin.

The diplomats were well informed about the extent and brutality of the pogrom and described reactions from the public. According to *Der Spiegel* the Finnish Ambassador Aarne Wuorimaa reported: “‘I am ashamed to be a German’ is a very common expression one hears.”

The well-informed executive of the SPD in exile (Sopade) also reported “outrage over this vandalism” and displays of public opposition from several parts of the country.

At this point in time, the German population had been subjected

to systematic anti-Semitic propaganda for five and a half years. In April 1933, the Nazis had organized the first nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses. In the same month, new laws were passed governing the admission of career civil servants and lawyers. Thirty-seven thousand Jews were deprived of their professional existence. Two years later the Nuremberg race laws degraded the Jews to second-class citizens. The laws forbade marriage and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews, deprived Jews of their civil rights and excluded them from many professions.

Anyone resisting could reckon with denunciation and persecution. Parties and organizations that could organize resistance no longer existed. The only two organizations that were not completely regimented, the Protestant and Catholic Churches, either said nothing or supported the pogroms.

The Protestant Bishop of Thuringia, Martin Sasse, welcomed the burning of the synagogues, citing Martin Luther, whose birthday fell on November 10. He described Luther as somebody who “warned his people about the Jews.”

The senior church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Mecklenburg declared: “No genuine Christian German can lament the state measures against the Jews across the nation, in particular the confiscation of Jewish assets, without being disloyal to the good and clean cause of the freedom struggle of the German nation against Jewish anti-Christian world Bolshevism.”

The Nazis pursued several goals with their attacks on Jews.

Firstly, anti-Semitism—like any form of racism up to this day—aimed to drive a wedge between the working class and politically backward layers of the middle classes. A master of this technique was the mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger, one of Hitler’s most important political role models. Lueger used a combination of anti-Semitism and anti-capitalist rhetoric to gain a large following in the petty bourgeoisie and lead the Austrian capital from 1897 to 1910.

Hitler’s own anti-Semitism was coined by his hatred of the socialist labour movement. The historian Konrad Heiden has pointed out that “not Rothschild, the capitalist, but rather Karl Marx, the socialist” inspired Hitler’s anti-Semitism. Hitler did not despise the labour movement because it was led by Jews, Heiden noted, rather he despised the Jews because they led the labour movement.

The destruction of the organized labour movement was in turn a prerequisite for unleashing unmitigated anti-Semitism. In contrast to the bourgeois parties, the Marxist workers’ movement had always vigorously opposed anti-Semitism. The fate of the Jews was inextricably linked to its fate.

Secondly, the expropriation of the Jews was a means of enriching the Nazi elite and financing rearmament in preparation for a new world war. Quite a few supported the pogroms because they personally benefited from the “Aryanisation” of Jewish property.

Immediately after the pogrom the Nazi regime went on to completely exclude the Jews from the German economy. As “atonement” for “the hostile attitude of Judaism towards the German people,” the Nazis introduced a wealth tax of 1 billion Reichsmarks. All Jewish citizens owning more than 5,000 Reichsmarks had to give 20 percent of their assets to the state.

This was a substantial sum for the state budget, which faced collapse. Hermann Göring, who had proposed the measure, noted at the time: “Very critical situation for the national finances. Remedy firstly via the billions deposited by the Jews and through the profits accrued by the aryanisation of Jewish businesses.”

After the Nazis took power the Jews had been persecuted and legally discriminated. With the November pogroms, they were put outside the law. Security forces and judicial authorities were ordered from the highest authority to look idly aside at the destruction of Jewish property and lives, and not to prosecute the perpetrators. Thirty thousand Jews were deported to the concentration camps at Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen, where they had to live and work in inhuman conditions and where many were killed.

The pogroms of November were a direct precursor to the Holocaust. The outbreak of war finally removed any remaining obstacles to the mass murder of the Jews.

The Holocaust merged with the war of extermination carried out by the Nazis in the East, which was aimed from the start at eliminating the entire political and intellectual leadership of the Soviet Union. The cold-blooded murder of 6 million Jews was the culmination of a campaign of extermination which extended to millions of Communists, partisans, intellectuals and civilians in Poland, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Responsibility for these historically unprecedented crimes rests not only with Hitler and his immediate henchmen, but also with the entire ruling elite in Germany. It had entrusted Hitler with power when all other mechanisms to suppress the working class and achieve its expansionist aims failed in the midst of the deepest crisis of capitalism.

Thyssen, Krupp, Flick and other industrialists had donated millions to the NSDAP. Hindenburg, the figurehead of the German army, had appointed Hitler Chancellor, and all of the bourgeois parties agreed to the Enabling Act, which sealed Hitler’s dictatorship.

The 75th anniversary of the November pogrom is therefore not only an occasion for remembrance, it is also a warning for the future. The ruling class responds to the deep global crisis of capitalism and growing class antagonisms by increasingly turning to authoritarian forms of rule, racism and war.

The barbarism of the Nazis, which culminated in the murder of millions of Jews and the war of extermination in the east, was the sharpest expression of the brutal nature of capitalism. A repetition of such disasters can only be prevented by overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with a socialist society.

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