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Kristallnacht and the Reversibility of Progress

After an angry mob of supporters of President Donald Trump attacked the United States Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 in order to disrupt congressional certification of the previous November's presidential election, journalists and historians searched for historical precedents to which to compare the riot. A comparison that received a great deal of media attention originated with Arnold Schwarzenegger, the bodybuilder who became a major star of Hollywood action movies, and who later served as governor of the state of California for seven years. A native of Styria (Steiermark) who migrated to the United States at the age of 21, Schwarzenegger released a video statement about the riot in Washington, in which he drew on his experiences as a child growing up in postwar Austria. He compared the right-wing extremists who attacked the Capitol to Nazis, describing his childhood encounters with "broken men" whose lives had been ruined by their involvement with National Socialism. He noted the similarities between Nazi stormtroopers and the so-called Proud Boys, a radical right-wing organization that had been praised by Donald Trump. Most of the public discussion, however, was devoted to Schwarzegger's comparison of the Capitol riot to the so-called Kristallnacht (the most commonly used American term to describe the November 1938 Pogrom).[1]

Several Jewish commentators pointed to the historically problematic nature of the comparison, although most sympathized with Schwarzenegger's intention, which was to draw lessons for Americans from his own family's unfortunate experience with fascism.[2] Apart from the question of historical accuracy, what is striking here is first, that Schwarzenegger chose Kristallnacht, rather than, for example, Hitler's failed November 1923 Putsch attempt as the basis for his comparison, and second, that the reference to Kristallnacht resonated so automatically and so powerfully in the American media, including the right-wing media. Not to be outdone by Schwarzenegger, several Trump supporters ad-

1 "Schwarzenegger Compares Capitol Mob Violence to Kristallnacht Destruction by Nazis in Viral Video", Washington Post, January 10, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2021/01/10/arnold-schwarzenegger-twitter-speech-capitol-nazis/, accessed January 29, 2021.

2 "Schwarzenegger's Kristallnacht Comparison is Outrageous … isn't It?" *Times of Israel*, January 14, 2021, https://www.timesofisrael.com/schwarzeneggers-kristallnacht-comparison-is-outrageous-isnt-it/, accessed January 29, 2021.

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vanced their own Kristallnacht comparisons, contending, for example, that the banning of alt-right commentators from social media in the wake of the Capitol riot was itself tantamount to a digital Kristallnacht.[3]

Schwarzenegger's video, and the responses to it, testify to the central position of the November Pogrom in the public memory of the Holocaust in Schwarzenegger's native and adopted homelands of Central Europe and the United States. Given that the Pogrom was not, strictly speaking, a genocidal event, and that its human toll fell far short of that of "Final Solution", it is not self-evident why the Pogrom occupies so prominent a place in popular Holocaust memory. This essay will posit several explanations and reflect on the significance of the memory of the Pogrom at our current historical moment.

The November Pogrom was a significant event for several reasons. It was the single instance of large-scale, public, and organized physical violence against Jews inside Nazi Germany before the outbreak of the Second World War. It unfolded in the open, in hundreds of German communities, even in those with very few Jewish residents, and took place partly in broad daylight; it inaugurated the definitive phase of so-called "Aryanization", i. e., the coerced expropriation of German Jewish property; it led to a dramatic rise in applications for emigration among German Jews, further exacerbating the Jewish refugee crisis; and it intensified diplomatic tensions between Germany and other countries, which had already suffered considerably as a result of the Sudeten Crisis.[4]

The Pogrom was aimed at a population of German and Austrian Jews that amounted to around half-a-million people, in contrast to about a million Polish Jews who were subjected to ghettoization and slave labor after 1939, and the multiple millions of Jews from all over Europe who were targeted by the so-called Final Solution. One reason why it continues to shock the conscience, despite the magnitude of the subsequent Holocaust, is that the violence of November 1938 was of a form that disturbs us precisely because of its familiar and recognizable nature. It was an act of barbarism, a cathartic outpouring of ethnic and religious hatred on a gigantic scale. In this respect, it was rather different from the "Final Solution", which was planned and implemented in a manner that was far more bureaucratic. Of course, there were elements of the "Final Solution" in which barbarism, sadism, and raw hatred were very much on display,

3 "Why is Everybody Talking about Kristallnacht?" *Forward*, January 11, 2021, https://forward.com/culture/461891/kristallnacht-schwarzenegger-steve-king-jeanine-pirro-parler/, accessed January 29, 2021.

4 There are many synthetic works on the Pogrom. Here the author draws on his own such study, *Kristallnacht 1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

but the overall character of the genocide was that of an action that was conceived and executed in a coldly rational way. Historians and philosophers have characterized the "Final Solution" as a kind of modernity run amok, epitomized by Auschwitz, where an unwanted population was subjected to an industrial process of wealth extraction, killing, and physical disposal.[5] In contrast, there was little about the Pogrom that was modern, other than that some of the perpetrators travelled by automobile and communicated via telephone during the violence. The primordial quality of the Kristallnacht is precisely what disturbs us most about it. It did not reflect modernity run amok, but rather modernity suspended. In this respect, the Pogrom was by no means unprecedented. Jews had fallen victim to pogroms for decades, and large-scale group violence targeted at ethnic minorities were a rather normal occurrence in many societies, including the United States during the 1920s and the 1930s. But Germany, where a high value is placed on law and order, did not seem a likely candidate for such violence, even after several years of Nazi rule. The November Pogrom, therefore, marked a breach of civilization in a country that had previously been celebrated, not least among its Jewish citizens, for being civilized.

Even by the standards of Nazi Germany up to that point, the Pogrom marked a significant departure from previous practices. Between the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 and November 1938, anti-Jewish measures had been mainly legal and bureaucratic in nature. It had largely been through the promulgation of laws, decrees, and regulations that German Jews had been deprived of their citizenship, their jobs, and their property, bureaucratic and legal methods of persecution. The disenfranchisement of Jews had taken place within the framework of the law. This process had been spurred on by frequent incidents of violence and intimidation, which, while tolerated and sometimes encouraged by the national leadership, were not legal. One point that has been emphasized in some recent scholarship, including my own, is that these illegal acts of violence and intimidation targeted at Jews were more frequent than has generally been recognized in histories of Nazi Germany.[6] Nevertheless, the Pogrom did represent an entirely new dimension of antisemitic violence on the part of the Nazis. This was widely recognized at the time by Jews, Germans, and the outside world.

The unprecedented scale and intensity of the violence of November 1938 has led some historians and commentators to characterize the Pogrom as a

5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).
6 Most notably: Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung: Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2007).

"prelude" to the Holocaust.[7] This term may be justified inasmuch as the scale and destructiveness of the Pogrom foreshadowed the mass anti-Jewish violence that occurred later, during World War Two, more than they resembled the sporadic attacks on Jews that had taken place earlier, between 1933 and 1938. But the term "prelude" can also be misleading in two important respects. First, I've already mentioned that the Pogrom lacked the careful preparation and official coordination that were hallmarks of the "Final Solution", but I want to expand on this point. One of the most widely held misconceptions about the Pogrom is that it had been planned in advance. All of the evidence, however, points to the absence of advance preparation, and to a decision by Hitler to unleash the violence during the day on November 9, only hours in advance of the actual pogrom. In the enormous documentary record left behind by the Nazi regime, no historian has ever found as much as a single document reflecting a pre-existing plan, advance preparation, or a high-level decision taken before November 9. A crucial document that we do have is the diary of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, in which Goebbels reported in some detail about a conversation he had with Hitler on November 9, which resulted in Hitler authorizing the Pogrom.[8] We also have many memoirs and legal testimonies by lower-level Nazi officials to the effect that the order to launch the Pogrom in their region or town arrived only late in the evening on November 9.

So why, then, does the myth persist that the Kristallnacht was planned and prepared-for in advance?[9] One reason is that many German Jews believed this at the time of the event. They could not comprehend that an atrocity of such magnitude could be organized and executed on the spur of the moment. In addition, as thousands of Jewish men who had been arrested in the immediate aftermath of the Pogrom arrived in concentration camps, they were informed by existing inmates about recent construction to expand camp capacity. They interpreted the camp expansions as evidence of a Nazi plan to arrest and incarcerate German Jews. At the time this was a very reasonable conclusion, but, as we now know, it was erroneous. The expanded camp capacity had been intended for Germans classified by the Nazi SS as "asocial" or "averse to work", and not for German Jews.[10]

Emphasizing the absence of planning or preparation for the Kristallnacht, which is to say, recognizing the Kristallnacht for the improvised event that it

7 Note, for example, the title of Martin Gilbert's study, *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction* (New York: Harper, 2006).

8 *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, ed. Elke Fröhlich, 30 vols. (Munich: Saur, 1993–2007), part I, vol. 6, entry for November 10, 1938.

9 E. g., Gilbert, *Kristallnacht,* 26.

10 Steinweis, *Kristallnacht*, 189, note 30.

actually was, does not diminish its atrociousness. To the contrary – we must ask how it was possible for an atrocity on that scale to ensue from an improvisation. The answer lies in the readiness of tens of thousands of Germans to perpetrate acts of violence against Jews on a moment's notice. Recognizing the improvised nature of the Pogrom does not soften the indictment of German society, it deepens it.

The improvised quality of the November Pogrom distinguished it from the meticulously planned genocide of the war years, which is one reason why I hesitate to refer to the Pogrom as a "prelude." A second reason is the risk of depicting the Pogrom as an element of a Nazi master plan culminating in the mass murder of the Jews. In November 1938, no Nazi plan for the mass murder of the Jews yet existed. At that time, Nazi policy toward German Jews focused on compelling them to emigrate. The decision to murder the Jews of Europe, including those who had remained in Germany, emerged in the year 1941. This decision resulted from a complex set of policy considerations that the German leadership did not anticipate in late 1938. From our perspective as historians, we look back at history and position the Kristallnacht along a trajectory culminating in genocide. But those who ordered and participated in the Pogrom did not necessarily see it that way. It was a "prelude" only to those who know how the story ended.

While the Pogrom was not part of a genocidal master plan, it did signal the death knell of Jewish life in Germany. Before November 1938, as badly as the situation had deteriorated, only about one-third of German Jews had emigrated. Many who had tried to leave could find no refuge in their desired destinations. Some hoped that the situation might improve, or at least not deteriorate further. Despite the persecution, one could still live as a Jew in Germany. There were synagogues, Jewish hospitals, Jewish schools, Jewish newspapers, and Jewish cultural organizations. But after the Pogrom, a Jewish future in Germany was no longer possible or imaginable.

The shock of this revelation should not be underestimated. The culture that was now seen as doomed had been a very special one, having produced great accomplishments in science, the arts, and Jewish thought. Germany had not only produced Einstein, it had also produced Reform Judaism. The Jews of Germany had lived for centuries as a persecuted people, and had then experienced emancipation, integration, economic success, and educational attainment. Between 1914 and 1918, ten thousand Jews had sacrificed their lives for their German Fatherland. The negation of German Jewry as a distinct cultural entity began in 1933, and then reached its point of no return with the Kristallnacht. The Pogrom exposed not only the fragility of civilization, but also the reversibility of progress.

For this reason, the Pogrom continues to haunt Jews in our time. It feeds a sense of insecurity about their acceptance by the Christian majority. This is a main reason why the November Pogrom figures so prominently in Holocaust memory in the United States, both among Jews and more broadly. If such a fate could befall the Jews of Germany, who were successful and patriotic, then why not the Jews of the United States? One could argue that the United States is a fundamentally different place than Germany was in 1933, but one could also concede that some degree of Jewish anxiety is understandable given the history. And of course, not only Jews, but any historically persecuted minority might legitimately interpret the Kristallnacht as powerful evidence that progress is not irreversible.

Such a universalistic appreciation of the history and lessons of the November Pogrom has shaped the commemorative culture around the Holocaust in American Jewish circles, and in American society more broadly, for a long time. One explanation for this emphasis is that American understandings of the history of the Holocaust have generally been shaped by a disproportionate focus on Germany and the experiences of German Jews in historical education and popular culture. But probably more important is the perception that Germany's assault on its own Jewish minority presented a more compelling lesson to Americans than the quantitively larger German assault on the Jews of Poland and Eastern Europe. A universalizing approach to Holocaust memory has corresponded to the growing ethos of multiculturalism in elite American circles in the past couple of decades. It has also dovetailed with intellectual currents in the field of Holocaust Studies, which has shifted increasingly to a comparative genocide studies paradigm (although not without controversy). The advent of Donald Trump's presidency, with its open xenophobia and barely disguised racism, has lent even greater urgency to the deployment of Holocaust memory in the name of universal human rights.

This universalistic understanding of the history of the November Pogrom is very often placed at the center of Holocaust commemoration ceremonies and programs in Jewish communities and at universities in the United States. In November 2020, the Reform Jewish community of Warren, New Jersey, for example, sponsored multiple events to coincide with the anniversary of the Pogrom. One event featured a former neo-Nazi who talked about "how he moved past a life of hate, and about how it's imperative to speak up against anti-Semitism and all forms of hatred when we know it's happening." At another event, devoted to the subject of "Genocide Prevention in the Age of Extremism", the speaker was Jacqueline Murekatete, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide who became an internationally recognized human rights activist.

These presentations complemented others that focused more narrowly on the events of November 1938 in Germany.[11]

Similarly, on Long Island, the suburban region east of New York City, representatives of Jewish organizations embraced the annual Kristallnacht commemoration as an opportunity to warn against hatred more generally. A Holocaust survivor in the town of North Hempstead told a local television news program, "We have issues, we have problems, we have 7.5 billion people on this planet, and we all need to live together." "I want them to understand what happened and not repeat the same steps which lead to extreme evil", he continued. The same news broadcast contained an interview with the chairperson of a local Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center. "Let's not go there again", she warned, "let's make sure that we understand that the hate that we're seeing now is what led to the Holocaust." She was not referring to antisemitism specifically, but rather to the more general uptick in racism and xenophobia discernable in the United States in the past few years.[12]

This sort of universalized commemoration of the November Pogrom is not limited to Jewish congregations or institutions. At Seton Hill University in Pennsylvania, the main purpose of the annual Kristallnacht remembrance held in November 2020 was "not only to remember and honor the millions of innocent victims of German fascism, but to remind us of how essential it is that we continue to work together to create a world that respects the inherent dignity of everyone – a world where such atrocities will never happen again."[13] At Chapman University in California, an annual Kristallnacht commemoration in 2018 was co-sponsored by multiple student religious organizations, including not only Hillel, the Jewish student society, but also the Baha'is of Chapman, the Circle of the Triple Goddess (Wicca), the Latter-day-Saints (Mormon) Student Association, the Muslim Student Association, and the Newman Catholic Fellowship.[14] This "interfaith" approach to addressing historical injustice is quite common at American universities. It should also be emphasized that such remembrance

11 "2020 Kristallnacht Commemorations", Temple Har Shalom, Warren New Jersey, https://templeharshalom.org/?s=Kristallnacht, accessed January 29, 2021.

12 "Long Islanders commemorate 82nd anniversary of Kristallnacht", News 12 Brooklyn, November 9, 2020, https://brooklyn.news12.com/long-islanders-commemorate-nd-anniversary-of-kristallnacht, accessed January 29, 2021.

13 "Seton Hill's Annual Kristallnacht Remembrance Service will be Virtual", The Trib, November 6, 2020, https://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/seton-hills-annual-kristallnacht-remembrance-service-will-be-virtual/, accessed January 29, 2021.

14 "An Interfaith Commemoration of Kristallnacht", Chapman University, Rogers Center for Holocaust Education, https://www.chapman.edu/research/institutes-and-centers/holocaust-education/rodgers-center/index.aspx, accessed January 29, 2021.

events focused specifically on Kristallnacht occur in addition to, rather than instead of, more general Holocaust commemorations on January 27, in connection with International Holocaust Remembrance Day, or in April, in connection with the Jewish *Yom Hashoah* observance.

In German collective memory of the persecution of the Jews, the November Pogrom has featured prominently, but in ways that are complex and even contradictory. Germans who have a decent understanding of history are aware of the contribution that Jews had made to German culture. So in addition to recognizing the Pogrom as an atrocity against its Jewish victims, they see the end of German-Jewish culture as a self-inflicted wound by a German nation that rejected an important part of itself.

On the other hand, the memory of the Pogrom was long a sanitized one. The mass participation by ordinary Germans in the brutality of the Kristallnacht was, for a long time, largely forgotten or ignored. Instead, there arose a self-exculpatory narrative in which responsibility for the Pogrom has been attributed to Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and the stormtroopers of the Nazi party. In this skewed understanding of history, a tiny sliver of German society had carried out the Pogrom, while the vast majority had witnessed it passively. This narrative was psychologically comforting and politically convenient in both halves of a divided Germany during the Cold War and persisted into the post-unification period after 1990.[15]

More recently, however, a more self-critical understanding of the conduct of the German population during Kristallnacht has gained wider acceptance. One reason for this is an improved understanding of the actual events of November 1938. Although the Pogrom now lies over 80 years in the past, research on the subject is by no means closed.[16] Our knowledge of the Pogrom has been significantly enhanced by historical documentation that has been ignored or been difficult to access, most notably the documentation from post-1945 trials of Pogrom perpetrators before German courts.[17] Equally important has been a psychological shift in German society. As the Nazi era has receded further into the past, it has become easier for Germans to acknowledge the complicity of previous generations in the crimes of Nazism. An honest confrontation

15 Harald Schmid, *Erinnern an den „Tag der Schuld": Der Novemberpogrom von 1938 in der deutschen Geschichtspolitik* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse, 2001).

16 A recent publication with important new insights is *New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi Pogrom in Global Comparison,* ed. Wolf Gruner and Steven J. Ross (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2019).

17 The trials, and the documentation generated by them, are analyzed in Edith Raim, *Justiz zwischen Diktatur und Demokratie: Wiederaufbau und Ahndung von NS-Verbrechen in Westdeutschland 1945–1949* (Munich: DeGruyter, 2013).

with its own difficult past has been a key factor in the emergence of Germany as a widely admired democratic nation.

Most recently, the rise of a new right-wing party has represented a challenge to Germany's admirable self-critical approach to its own history. That party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is best known for its condemnation of Angela Merkel's decision to admit about a million refugees, but its leaders have also disparaged Holocaust memorials and expressions of contrition for the Holocaust. The AfD now enjoys support from about 10 percent of the German electorate.[18] Time will tell whether Germany will be able to resist the epidemic of ethno-nationalism and nostalgia for authoritarianism that is currently infecting the West. The powerful collective memory of the Pogrom, and of the Holocaust more generally, has served as an inoculation against precisely the kind of historical forgetting promoted by the ethno-nationalist right in Europe and beyond.

The most recent commemorations of the Pogrom in Germany have, accordingly, emphasized the contemporary relevance of the struggle against antisemitism and racism. Calling for international solidarity in the fight against antisemitism, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in a joint statement with his Israeli and Austrian counterparts, lamented that "the dark shadows of the past have not disappeared from our streets." In a message directed to the Israeli President, Steinmeier said the "sickening outburst of violence" of 1938 was a "stark warning to us today." Noting that German Jews had been advised by the country's antisemitism commissioner against openly wearing the kippa, Steinmeier called the November Pogrom a "pressing warning" for the present day.[19]

The intensified threat from the racist, ethnonational, and xenophobic right across much of the western world has thus produced a transatlantic convergence in thinking about the significance of the November Pogrom. While the Pogrom does not represent a historical worst-case for genocide, it does provide a dramatic precedent for what happens when a society turns away from a pluralistic understanding of itself and acquiesces in bigotry. While Arnold Schwarzenegger might not count among the most nuanced of historians, the deeper wisdom of his comparison is incontrovertible.

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18 „Politbarometer II Januar 2021", Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Aktuelles/Politbarometer/, accessed January 29, 2021.

19 Angel Merkel Laments "Disgrace" of Kristallnacht, Deutsche Welle, November 9, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/angela-merkel-laments-disgrace-of-kristallnacht/a-55548319, accessed January 29, 2021.