New Perspectives on Kristallnacht

Ross, Steven J.

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The idea for a volume reassessing Kristallnacht came together at the Association of Jewish Studies Conference in December 2016. At the time, I was writing about the impact of Kristallnacht in Los Angeles, while my colleague Wolf Gruner, the Shapell-Guerin Chair in Jewish Studies and History and founding director of the USC Shoah Foundation Center for Advanced Genocide Research, was researching the mass destruction of private homes and Jewish reactions toward violence during the November 1938 pogroms.

The historical works I consulted suggested that the horrors of Kristallnacht turned American—and much of world—public opinion against the Hitler regime. Yet, what I discovered was that despite worldwide condemnations, very little changed for Jews in the United States. Although American anti-Nazi groups became more forceful in their attacks on Nazi Germany after the November 1938 massacres, so, too, did members of the German-American Bund grow more militant. Inspired by the lack of western opposition to Hitler, Bundists began preparing in earnest for Der Tag, the day Nazis would seize control of the American government.

If the American response to Kristallnacht was more complicated than historians had suggested, I wondered how much more complex European responses must have been. With the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht only two years away, Wolf Gruner—who was far more expert in the period—and I agreed to organize an international conference that would reassess the worldwide impact of the horrible events of November 9–10, 1938. With the help of outside funders and the staff from our two institutes—the USC Casden Institute and the Center for Advanced Genocide Research—we succeeded in bringing twenty-two scholars from six countries to the University of Southern California on November 5–7, 2018 to reassess the events surrounding Kristallnacht and its lasting legacy.

Volume 17 of the Casden Annual includes fifteen of the articles presented at our conference “New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi
Pogrom in Global Comparison.” Examining events eighty years after the violent pogrom of 1938, contributors to this volume offer new cutting-edge scholarship on the event and its repercussions. We hope the essays will inspire further research into one of the most important tragedies of the twentieth century.

I wish to thank my co-editor, Wolf Gruner, for helping to make the conference and this volume a reality. I also wish to thank Marilyn Lundberg Melzian for her wonderful work as our volume’s production editor.

Steven J. Ross

Myron and Marian Casden Director

Professor of History