New Perspectives on Kristallnacht
Ross, Steven J.

Published by Purdue University Press

Ross, Steven J.
New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi Pogrom in Global Comparison.
Purdue University Press, 2019.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/73016.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/73016

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2502072
Editorial Introduction

by Wolf Gruner and Steven J. Ross

On November 9 and 10, 1938, under the pretext of revenge for the assassination of a Nazi diplomat by a young Polish Jew, SS, SA, and citizens in Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland, acting on orders of the Nazi leadership, launched the deadliest violence in the region's history. Armed with axes and sledgehammers, with gasoline and pistols, groups of perpetrators systematically demolished Jewish synagogues, schools, businesses and other properties while looting, beating, raping, and murdering innocent Jews. By the time Joseph Goebbels stopped the violence, the soon-dubbed "Kristallnacht" pogrom left an unknown number of Jewish men and women dead (estimates are as high as several hundred), more than ten thousand Jewish businesses destroyed, and over two thousand synagogues burned to the ground; thirty thousand male Jews were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps, where several hundred more died from beatings, starvation, and cold.¹

The reasons for the violence went back to the end of 1937, when the Nazi leadership began to realize that strategies developed since 1933 to expel the Jews from Germany stalled because of the growing pauperization of the Jewish population and the unwillingness of countries abroad to accept Jewish refugees and emigrants. After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, previous efforts at expulsion evaporated, as greater numbers of Jews lived under Nazi rule.² Moreover, a war seemed increasingly imminent as the political crisis over the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia heated up. The Nazi leadership, however, was determined to drive all Jews out of the country before the outbreak of a potential war. In August 1938, the Nazi state decided to dedicate all its hard currency to prepare for war instead of financing mass emigration. This created a fundamental dilemma: on the one hand, the Nazis wanted all Jews to leave
as soon as possible; on the other hand, they did not want Jewish emigration to cost the Nazi regime any money. To cut this Gordian knot of the expulsion policy, which the government itself had tied, the Nazi leadership proceeded with violence and brutality. On the evening of November 9, 1938 in Munich, after learning about the passing of the German diplomat vom Rath in Paris, Hitler decided that the Jews should now “feel the force of the people’s rage,” and Goebbels gave later instructions on how this “upsurge” of popular anger should be organized.3

However, even with the launch of previously unprecedented, organized nationwide anti-Jewish violence, the National Socialist leadership did not succeed in their main goal: to expel all Jews from the German Reich. Blaming the victims for instigating the violence, the Nazi government imposed a $400 million (1 Billion Reichmark) fine upon the German Jewish community. Yet, the lack of money prevented many Jews from leaving. The Nazi leadership, thus, developed a new double strategy: to force emigration by all means, while separating the remaining Jews from the rest of society.4

This volume offers new and innovative scholarly research that changes our traditional views of the course of and the reactions to the violent anti-Jewish event. The selected essays originate from an international conference, “New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi Pogrom in Global Comparison,” held on November 5–7, 2018 at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and Villa Aurora in Pacific Palisades. This was the only international academic conference to mark the 80th anniversary of the fateful events of November 1938.

The event was co-organized by the USC Shoah Foundation Center for Advanced Genocide Research and the USC Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life, and presented in cooperation with the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC, and the Center for Research on Antisemitism at the Technical University Berlin, Germany. Our gathering featured twenty-two junior and senior scholars from six countries (the United States, Germany, Israel, Canada, the United Kingdom and India), who represented multiple disciplines, including history, literature, philosophy, religion, political science, film and cultural studies, and French and Jewish studies. The conference aimed to resituate the anti-Jewish pogrom in its historical context as well as its place in world history.
NEW RESEARCH ON THE VIOLENT EVENTS

Kristallnacht is often thought of as one of the most well researched events in the history of the Third Reich. The essays in this volume challenge a variety of traditional perceptions of the pogrom of November 1938 and explore facets of the two days of carnage throughout Greater Germany that have not received significant scholarly attention. Our authors offer insights into new aspects of the violence, including the impact of violence on gender, the mass participation of citizens in rioting, the destruction of homes, and the wide variety of Jewish reactions—from the Yiddish press in Eastern Europe to orthodox rabbis throughout the world to Jewish organizations in the United States. The volume's concluding essays examine the lingering global legacy of Kristallnacht by exploring violent events in Rwanda, India, and Israel.

In the opening chapter, Francois Guesnet (London) and Ulrich Baumann (Berlin) trace historical shifts in terminology regarding the events of November 9–10, 1938—shifts that carry enormous political implications. At the time it occurred, the November violence was widely referred to as a pogrom, while soon after 1945 politicians and scholars referred to it as Kristallnacht or Reichskristallnacht, a term that had emerged before the war ended. However, over the past several decades, historians and citizens—especially in Germany—started using the term pogrom or November pogrom, since they found the former too euphemistic for the violent event. The authors make us aware that these terms and their use deserve further scrutiny. For the authors, pogrom generally refers to unplanned eruptions of anti-Semitic violence by local groups, yet the events in November 1938 need to be understood as state-sponsored violence. To label them as pogroms, they argue, is to minimize the scope of violence by simply attributing it to disgruntled local anti-Semites rather than to a clear government policy. Thus, both authors advocate using “state terror”—not pogrom—as a term that better captures the centrally organized dimensions of Kristallnacht.

Wolf Gruner’s research provides surprising insights into two greatly overlooked aspects of Kristallnacht: the mass destruction of private homes, and, Jewish reactions toward violence. Using examples drawn from large cities and small towns throughout Greater Germany, he reveals how the demolition and vandalizing of Jewish homes was systematic and of an astonishing scale and intensity. The widespread destruction of home furnishings was accompanied by beatings, sexual violence and murder. This rampant violation of privacy had enormous impact on families and on the Jewish population as a whole. Gruner also shows how Jews reacted in unexpected ways to the violent event:
Jews petitioned the Gestapo to stop violence and arrests; they documented the destruction of synagogues and shops; they protested in public or with anonymous letters; and they physically defended themselves from attacks.

Examining the gendered nature of violence against married Jewish-Christian couples, Maximilian Strnad argues that mixed religious households headed by Jewish men experienced far more death and destruction during Kristallnacht than those headed by Christian husbands and their Jewish wives. Jewish-headed mixed households also had higher rates of family separations and divorces following the November violence. For intermarried Jews, Strnad concludes, the feeling of being responsible for the misery their families experienced often lasted for decades.

Mary Fulbrook turns our attention to the less well-understood role of ordinary citizens in “bystander” violence, passivity, complicity, and courage during the November terror. She explores five categories of what she calls “bystander” reaction: active intervention on behalf of victims; demonstrative sympathy for victims; neutral, inactive, impassive eyewitnesses; support for acts of perpetrators; and, active participatory complicity on the side of perpetrators.

ON MEDIA AND OTHER REACTIONS
The extraordinary violence unleashed during Kristallnacht was reported in newspapers, radios, and newsreels throughout the world. Various essays in this volume explode the myth that people around the world did not know what was happening in Germany. Norman Domeier examines media coverage of Kristallnacht by American journalists based in Berlin. Drawing from a wide variety of sources, Domeier details the experiences, reports, and reflections of four journalists who wrote for the New York Times, the New York Herald Tribune and the Associated Press. His chapter shows how quick and thorough the event was covered in the American press. Domeier argues that until December 1941, the American public was the best-informed public in the world about Nazi Germany.5

Chapters by Anne-Christin Klotz and Jeffrey Koerber dealing with press coverage of Kristallnacht in Poland and the Soviet Union deepen our understanding of what was known and shared among Jewish and non-Jewish citizens in both countries at the time. Klotz examines the ways in which Polish-Jewish journalists and the Yiddish press in Warsaw reported on events in Germany
from 1933 to 1938. She recounts the extent to which reporters actively tried to help Jewish compatriots suffering inside the Nazi regime. Journalists found the boundaries between “objective” reportage and activism continually blurred during times of crisis. Likewise, Koerber looks at the ways in which Soviet Yiddish- and Russian-language newspapers covered growing anti-Semitism in Germany—coverage that allowed Jewish readers to follow developments in Nazi Germany long before the onset of World War II. He explores the similarities and differences between the coverage of events by the Soviet Yiddish- and Russian-language newspapers.

Turning to Great Britain, Stephanie Seul describes how Kristallnacht caused an outcry from the British press and Parliament but not from the BBC—which acted as an unofficial wing of the Foreign Office. Both the government and the BBC’s German-language broadcasts refrained from criticizing the event or the Hitler regime. Seul argues they did this for three reasons: Whitehall feared that any public condemnation of Germany would worsen the situation for its Jewish residents; the British government viewed anti-Jewish policy as a purely German internal affair; and, finally, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain believed his nation was not militarily prepared for war and therefore did not want to risk aggravating already tense relations with Nazi Germany.

The media was not the only source of information about Kristallnacht or the only ones to analyze the event and the causes of rising anti-Semitism in Germany. Jewish thinkers and organizations throughout the world tried to make sense of the difficult situation unfolding before their eyes. Gershon Greenberg looks at how Orthodox Jewish rabbis and commentators in Eastern Europe, Palestine, and the United States responded to the violent events of Kristallnacht. Many Orthodox writers (predominantly rabbis), he argues, blamed the events of November 1938 on German Jews who were supposedly being punished by God for abandoning Torah in favor of assimilation.

Looking beyond the usual government and public responses in the United States, Hasia Diner sees 1938 as a turning point for Jews in America. Rejecting the idea of American Jewish passivity, she argues that following Hitler’s rise to power many groups and individuals discussed the best ways to respond to growing repression and anti-Semitism in Germany. The events of 1938, culminating in Kristallnacht, motivated American Jews to act, organize, and speak out. Diner details the range of communal reactions and responses, including raising funds for refugees, greater public and political advocacy, forming Jewish community councils, and reorganizing Jewish organizations.
to respond more quickly to escalating dangers and needs both abroad and in the United States.

Steven J. Ross argues that Kristallnacht had a major impact in the United States, but not in the way we usually think. Focusing on Los Angeles, he shows how Nazi aggression abroad was accompanied by Nazi aggression at home as local Bundists secretly began preparing for Der Tag, “the day” when Nazis and their supporters would seize control of the American government. Yet, the knowledge of the Kristallnacht violence also produced an increase in local Jewish resistance. Leon Lewis, who had run a local spy ring against pro-Nazi activities in Los Angeles since the summer of 1933, stepped up his efforts at infiltration and surveillance after November 1938, and passed on information gleaned from his undercover operatives to the FBI, and Naval and Army Intelligence that helped foil a series of Nazi and fascist plots aimed at murder and sabotage in California.

AFTERMATH AND LEGACY
The legacy of Kristallnacht lasted for decades well beyond the November terror and in places well beyond Greater Germany. Alexander Walther challenges the supposed absence of commemorations in East Germany. Kristallnacht and the Shoah, he argues, were memorialized throughout the GDR’s existence. Yet, for most of that time, East German authorities used November 9 commemorations to celebrate communist resistance to Nazism and to criticize capitalist West Germany, while—as an overlooked aspect—the East German Jewish communities used the days of commemoration for their political agenda and internal audience. Not until the 1970s, and especially after the collapse of the GDR, was East Germany’s Jewish minority (especially its survivors) able to highlight the experiences and sufferings of the state-sponsored November pogrom’s Jewish victims to a broader public.

Turning to Israel, Liat Steir-Livny shows how left and right public figures have used the memory of Kristallnacht and the Holocaust in varied ways to boost their political agendas. Her essay examines a violent demonstration against African immigrants orchestrated by right-wing activists in South Tel Aviv on May 23, 2012, which was immediately dubbed and condemned by left-leaning political groups as “Kristallnacht in Tel Aviv.” Israelis on both sides of the ideological spectrum used social media to exploit the original histori-
Editorial Introduction

cal event by turning references to Kristallnacht into a series of symbols and memes, while newspapers in Europe, Russia, and the United States referred to the Tel Aviv riots as the “Israeli Kristallnacht.” By so doing, Steir-Livny argues, Israelis and media coverage deprived the 1938 event of its profound historical context and meaning and turned Kristallnacht into a simple metaphor for shattered property and violence toward “others.”

Associations of racial violence and Kristallnacht also made their way into literary narratives written by survivors of the Rwandan genocide and the mass violence in Myanmar. Focusing on works by Rwandan Scholastique Mukasonga and Rohingyan Habiburahamn, Nathalie Ségeral describes how these authors used the terms Kristallnacht, pogrom, and Holocaust when referring to the waves of massacres perpetrated by the Hutu against the Tutsi from the late 1950s to the culmination of violence during the 1994 genocide, and to the persecution of the Burmese Rohingyas that lasted until 2018. In both instances, she concludes, the Kristallnacht paradigm is employed as highly relevant to contemporary “minority” histories and as the lasting symbol of a turning point in genocidal violence.

The volume’s concluding chapter brings our discussion back to the opening essay’s concern with terminology. Baijayanti Roy compares the German pogrom of November 1938 with the “Gujarat pogrom” perpetrated by members of the majority Hindu community against the minority Muslims in the Indian federal state of Gujarat between February 28 and March 1, 2002. Although often referred to in the press as a pogrom, Roy—like Baumann and Guesnet—argues that the violence was not spontaneous (as were most pogroms) but was comprised of a series of premeditated, carefully orchestrated attacks on Muslims instigated by today’s Indian prime minister and back-then chief minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi and right-wing Hindu nationalist groups with the aim of ethnic cleansing. The deadly state-sponsored violence that left one thousand to two thousand dead (mostly Muslims) and 150,000 rendered homeless, she argues, had more in common with the Nazi state-sponsored “Kristallnacht” than it did with more spontaneous communal oriented pogroms of Eastern Europe.

This volume marks the beginning of what we hope will be a major reexamination of Kristallnacht, an event that many perceive as a turning point leading to the Holocaust. Our authors demonstrate how important new knowledge can be gained by re-approaching a well-known event and challenging traditional assumptions. Yet, there is so much more to explore about Kristallnacht that goes beyond the themes raised in this volume. In particular, we need to
know more about the reactions and responses, the defiance and resistance of the individual Jews and their organizations and communities. Likewise, we need a fuller exploration of the participation of ordinary Germans and Austrians in the destruction and plunder, the sexual violence and murders, which seemed to have been more widespread than previously assumed. Finally, we need to understand the context and lasting legacy of the state sponsored terror of November 1938. We hope that scholars will use this volume as a launching point for exploring new avenues and interdisciplinary perspectives on one of the crucial events of the twentieth century.
Notes


Bibliography


