New Perspectives on Kristallnacht

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The anti-Jewish pogrom staged by the Nazis during the night of November 9–10, 1938 was carried out in the full glare of world publicity. The Nazis made no attempt to conceal evidence of the atrocities, which subsequently became known as Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass. The Nazi terror deeply shocked the British government and public, particularly as it came only a few weeks after the Munich Agreement, which Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain considered a first step towards a peaceful settlement with Hitler. The pogrom helped, more than anything else, to harden British opinion towards Germany.

Given the development of Nazi anti-Jewish policy, the role of anti-Semitism in Nazi domestic propaganda, and the revulsion felt in Great Britain about the pogrom, one might presume that Kristallnacht would have played a crucial role in the British radio broadcasts addressed to the German people. However, while the British press reported extensively and critically, the pogrom never took on prominence in German-language broadcasts. In order to understand the factors that influenced the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) reporting on Kristallnacht, and indeed on all Jewish topics, one needs to take a closer look at British diplomacy towards Germany during 1938–39 and the role the BBC played therein.
At the request of the government, the BBC started broadcasting in German at the height of the Sudeten crisis on September 27, 1938, when war and peace hung in the balance. Chamberlain’s principal reason for continuing the broadcasts after the Munich Agreement on September 29, 1938 was the realization that Britain and France were militarily unprepared for war against Germany. “Propaganda”—a term widely used at that time for British government publicity—offered a small chance to avert war by winning over the German public. Still, the Munich Agreement did not dispel Chamberlain’s mistrust regarding Hitler’s intentions. The BBC broadcasts therefore aimed to inform the German public of British efforts to appease Hitler and to avoid war. They sought to strengthen the desire of the Germans for peace and to arouse doubts and criticism in regard to Hitler’s aggressive foreign policy. Moreover, the propaganda campaign was to warn Hitler that he would risk opposition from his own people if he provoked a war involving the British Empire and France, and thus induce the dictator to seek a peaceful solution to his territorial claims.

The newly created German Service was closely supervised by the Foreign Office. Whitehall never made it a secret that it considered the BBC broadcasts a propaganda instrument of the state. The close collaboration between the BBC and Whitehall meant that a consensus evolved in both institutions regarding the BBC’s treatment of the Nazi Jewish persecution. Although with hindsight one might assume that the terror against the Jews would seem to offer a strong moral argument against Nazism, reporting the Jewish persecution ran counter to the British propaganda strategy. Importantly, all information broadcast had to serve the aim of supporting Chamberlain’s appeasement policy by stimulating the resistance of the German public against the Nazi regime. As we shall see, continually informing the Germans about Nazi anti-Jewish policy was thought to have the opposite effect. In considering the representation of Kristallnacht and its aftermath in the BBC’s German-language broadcasts, we therefore have to bear in mind that the coverage of the pogrom was determined by Chamberlain’s foreign policy. Moreover, in order to better understand the limitations of the reporting, we also need to take a look at responses of the British domestic media to Kristallnacht.
BRITISH RESPONSES TO KRISTALLNACHT

The reaction of the British government to Kristallnacht was muted. While the United States recalled its ambassador—without, however, breaking off diplomatic relations altogether—London did not issue any official protest to Berlin. Certainly, the British government was well-informed. The British embassy and consulates in Germany reported extensively about Kristallnacht, the reaction of the German public to it, and Goebbels’ anti-British propaganda campaign in the aftermath of the pogrom accusing British politicians of warmongering and attacking British policy in Palestine. On November 13, Oliver Harvey, the Private Secretary of Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, noted in his diary: “The Jewish pogroms have shaken up world opinion—even the City—as to the character of the criminal regime we are up against in Germany. Every scrap of information, secret and public, we get from Germany now shows that the German Government are laughing at us, despising us and intending to dispossess us morally and materially from our world positions.”

There are three possible explanations as to why the British government refrained from officially protesting against Kristallnacht. First, Whitehall feared that any public condemnation would only worsen the situation of the Jews. Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes, the head of the British embassy in Berlin, warned on November 13 “that inevitable public condemnation and censure should be tempered by consideration that it will be visited on the unfortunate Jews whose sufferings will be increased.” Second, London viewed Nazi anti-Jewish policy as an internal German affair, which should not stand in the way of an Anglo-German understanding. Antisemitism was regarded as one of the central dogmas of the Nazi faith, and as long as the majority of the German people supported Nazism, Great Britain had no right to interfere. Ogilvie-Forbes informed Foreign Secretary Halifax on November 10 that “the treatment of German Jews is fiercely and jealously regarded as a purely internal matter. As you are aware from his recent speeches, the Chancellor is at present in an aggressive and anti-British mood [. . .]. In short, it is a wasp’s nest in which we would be ill-advised in our own interests and that of the Jews themselves gratuitously to poke our fingers.” And third, Chamberlain was concerned not to aggravate the already tense relations between Great Britain and Germany. Provoking the Nazi regime had to be avoided at all costs; it was therefore out of the question to criticise the pogrom in official statements. At a meeting of the Cabinet’s Foreign Policy Committee on November 14, 1938 Chamberlain ruled out any official protest against Nazi anti-Jewish policy because Great Britain was militarily not in a position to frighten Germany.
Parliament debated the pogrom on November 14 and 21, condemning in strong terms the Nazi atrocities and calling on the British government to secure a common refugee policy amongst the nations. When the Prime Minister was asked by a Labour MP whether he would consider issuing a statement condemning the pogrom and making known to the German government the deep feeling of horror aroused in Britain, Chamberlain replied evasively and stressed instead that the British embassy had been instructed to protest to the German Foreign Office against the allegations in the German press that former British ministers such as Winston Churchill, Duff Cooper and Anthony Eden had been involved in the murder of Ernst vom Rath. Goebbels apologized reluctantly in a statement made to the British news agency Reuters, but no German newspaper was allowed to reprint it.\(^{13}\)

Still, as a result of Kristallnacht, Great Britain relaxed its immigration policy. About forty thousand Jewish refugees were admitted before the outbreak of war, among them some ten thousand unaccompanied children, who arrived under the Kindertransport scheme.\(^ {14}\) Yet, entry of Jewish refugees into Palestine—a League of Nations mandated territory under British rule since 1920—remained strictly limited. Palestine was the scene of the Arab rebellion during 1936–39, which developed into a major revolt against the British (and the Jews) in 1937. Hence, London did all it could to limit Jewish immigration for fear of alienating the Arabs and endangering its strategic interests in the Middle East.\(^ {15}\)

While the British government sought to maintain friendly relations with Berlin and therefore refrained from openly criticizing the Nazis, Kristallnacht caused an outcry of indignation in the press. British newspapers brought detailed reports on their front and inside pages, and they printed photographs of the damage inflicted on Jewish property. As several studies have shown, the bulk of British press opinion reflected the public outrage felt in regard to the pogrom and unanimously condemned the events.\(^ {16}\) In their extensive reportage, quality papers as well as tabloids made no secret that they disbelieved the official German story of a spontaneous public reaction against the Jews. Rather, they held the view that the murder of Ernst vom Rath in Paris was used as a pretext by the German government for encouraging the attack on the Jews. In the days and weeks after Kristallnacht, British papers continued to report extensively; the coverage included editorials, letters to the editors as well as reports about world reactions. Headlines in the Manchester Guardian read, among others: “Reprisals against Jews” (November 12), “Germany’s Brutal Treatment of the Jews: Reaction of World Opinion” (November 18), “Reign of
Terror for German Jews: Organised Destruction of Property and Thousands of Arrests” (November 18). As Andrew Sharf put it, “the dominant note struck by the British Press […] was one of genuine moral outrage.”

Unlike the press, British newsreels were cautious in their treatment of the pogrom. As two studies have shown, this attitude was in part caused by the anti-Semitism prevalent in Great Britain at that time and reflected by the newsreels, and in part by Chamberlain’s appeasement policy, which complicated the reporting on the Nazi persecution of the Jews and on Jewish refugees. Newsreel publicity given to refugees could be seen as criticizing the German government for its treatment of the Jews, while some sections of the British public disliked the arrival of more Jews in Great Britain. Thus, with the exception of British Paramount, British newsreels did not report on Kristallnacht. The Paramount newsreel of November 21, 1938 focused on the international criticism of the pogrom and presented, among others, an American protest march followed by a statement from Rabbi Stephen Wise, the president of the American Jewish Congress and ardent critic of Nazi anti-Jewish policy, and Roosevelt’s recalling of the American ambassador in Berlin to Washington.

The Jewish refugee crisis in the aftermath of Kristallnacht received more attention. During December 1938 and January 1939, several sympathetic stories were brought about the arrival of Jewish refugee children in Britain. In this case, newsreels could be sure of public and government support: images of refugee children were more acceptable and raised less controversial concerns than those of adult refugees. Using emotive language, on December 5, a Gaumont-British newsreel focused on the need for the children to come to Great Britain and encouraged a sympathetic response of the British public to these unaccompanied minors.

The response of the BBC Home Service to Kristallnacht was equally cautious. The BBC had been founded as an independent institution committed to impartial political reporting. With the rise of the totalitarian dictatorships in Europe during the 1930s, the BBC and the Foreign Office developed an informal agreement concerning foreign affairs, whereby the BBC had to obtain clearance of all news content concerning controversial issues. In order to comply with the needs of Chamberlain’s appeasement policy, and because the BBC was widely perceived abroad as the official voice of the government, the Corporation developed an editorial policy which avoided negative publicity about Germany, and hence criticism of the persecution of the Jews. Moreover, as Guy Raz has argued in his study of the BBC’s responses, “News of anti-Jewish persecution was never considered a broadcast priority by the BBC and
the issue of its dissemination was never a source of contention between the BBC and the Foreign Office.” Both Raz and Jean Seaton have emphasized that latent anti-Semitism within the BBC was instrumental in preventing a more detailed and critical reporting on the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

Hence, the BBC Home Service did not condemn Kristallnacht. On November 10, the pogrom was mentioned in one news bulletin without comment, but with considerable detail:

After the death of Herr vom Rath [. . .], a national campaign of anti-Jewish rioting and arson began throughout Germany on November 10. Nine out of eleven synagogues in Berlin were set on fire, and synagogues were destroyed in many other parts of the country. Shop windows throughout Germany were smashed and goods destroyed or looted, and many shops and restaurants were also set on fire (. . .) all damage done during the attacks on Jewish property would be made good by the Jews themselves, and that from the beginning of next year no Jews would be allowed to engage in retail trades, export, business, commercial affairs or independent handicraft businesses or to act as managers.

Moreover, on November 19 the Home Service reported in three news bulletins the press criticism in Germany of British reactions to the pogrom, and on November 21 three news bulletins recounted the statements made during the House of Commons debate on Jewish refugees. However, the Home Service did not condemn the pogrom. In a letter to the Corporation, British Jews criticized the BBC for its failure to adequately convey the extent of the Nazi atrocities and the foreign reactions to them. This criticism could also be applied to the BBC’s German transmissions: nothing was broadcast that might have aroused the resentment of the Nazis.

KRISTALLNACHT IN THE BBC’S GERMAN-LANGUAGE BROADCASTS

During the first weeks of British German-language broadcasting little was reported about the plight of the German Jews. The period not only witnessed a surge in Nazi anti-Jewish terror, but also the climax of Chamberlain’s appeasement policy. As we have seen, Kristallnacht caused an outrage in the British press. This in turn provoked a massive press campaign by the Nazis
against Great Britain in general, and against British policy in Palestine in particular. British diplomats gave a detailed account of Goebbels’ anti-Jewish and anti-British propaganda campaign, which apparently was aimed at stirring up anti-Jewish and anti-British feelings among the German public. An internal Foreign Office memorandum of November 23 stated: “The reaction of the democratic states to the recent anti-Jewish excesses in Germany has led to an outburst of anti-British sentiment in the German press. […] The German press has concentrated on lurid accounts of terrorism throughout British imperial history, calling special attention to British military action in Palestine.” A British consul in Germany warned that this kind of propaganda would soon effectively poison the minds even of those Germans who had thus far been friendly to Great Britain. Not surprisingly, in the aftermath of Kristallnacht, the BBC seemed more concerned about countering Goebbels’ anti-British propaganda campaign than about reporting on the pogrom.

Little archival evidence is available to reconstruct what the BBC German Service did broadcast. There was certainly no lack of information. The British embassy and consulates in Germany reported extensively about Kristallnacht, the reaction of the German public to it, and Goebbels’ anti-British press campaign. On November 16, 1938, Ogilvie-Forbes informed Halifax that the aim of the anti-Jewish pogrom, which in his view was instigated and organized by the Nazi regime, was the complete elimination of the Jews. He also reported that the mass of the German people apparently did not support the anti-Jewish policy of the regime. However, the BBC German Service refrained from criticizing the Nazi regime. The most it did was to report the reaction to, and condemnation of, the pogrom in foreign countries. Goebbels had forbidden German newspapers to publish foreign press criticism of the pogrom; all they were allowed was to reprint a news agency statement on the foreign press reports by Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro. For the German public, the BBC German-language broadcasts were thus the only source of “uncensored news in their own language,” as the Berlin correspondent of The Scotsman explained: “This afternoon a taxi-driver told me that he had heard the BBC account of the reaction in the United States and in European countries to the German pogrom, and it had been an ‘eye-opener’ for him.”

While the German Service refrained from critically reporting on the pogrom, the British government and the BBC seemed to be more concerned about German press attacks on Great Britain and British policy in Palestine than about the fate of German Jewry. Sources documenting the BBC’s coverage of Kristallnacht are scarce, but there is ample evidence of the response given to
the Nazi anti-British press campaign. Nazi propaganda sought to undermine British prestige and authority in Palestine and in the Arab world as a whole; it was therefore considered a serious threat to British political and strategic interests in the Middle East. It is thus not surprising that in the aftermath of Kristallnacht, Whitehall opposed any talk of a “Jewish problem” in the BBC German Service. Appeals for sympathy towards the Jews, the London government feared, would only have alarmed the Arabs further and were likely to undermine British policy towards Palestine.35

From the second half of November 1938 onwards, Whitehall launched a vigorous campaign to counter Nazi allegations of British terrorism in Palestine and to improve the negative image of Britain among the German public. As part of its concerted propaganda campaign against the Third Reich, the Foreign Office sent five hundred reprints of a speech in the House of Commons by Malcolm MacDonald, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, to Berlin for distribution to the German public by the British embassy and consulates.36 It is possible that extracts of MacDonald’s speech were also broadcast on the German Service. In his speech—explicitly designed to answer Goebbels’ propaganda—MacDonald praised the conduct of British forces in Palestine despite difficult circumstances. He made also clear that the persecution of Jews in Germany could not be solved by allowing more Jews into Palestine.37 Moreover, the BBC German Service broadcast four Sonderberichte (special reports) on the subject of Palestine in February 1939. Unfortunately, their content is lost.38

THE BBC GERMAN SERVICE AND THE “JEWISH PROBLEM” IN THE AFTERMATH OF KRISTALLNACHT
Although Ogilvie-Forbes, the head of the Berlin embassy, had condemned Kristallnacht in the strongest possible terms—“I can find no words strong enough in condemnation of the disgusting treatment of so many innocent people,”39 he wrote—there is no evidence to show that British propaganda also condemned the pogrom. There were, however, voices urging Whitehall to report more critically about the Jewish persecution. On November 19, 1938, the Manchester branch of the League of Nations Union urged the British government “to broadcast by radio to the German nation the world’s revulsion from the increased persecution and suffering of the Jews” and to call “on the humanitarian section of the German people to bring pressure on their Government
The Absence of "Kristallnacht" and Its Aftermath in BBC

with a view to calling a halt to the present forms of barbarism and cruelty on a helpless minority. Moreover, on January 23, 1939, the Cabinet’s Foreign Policy Committee had before them a memorandum by the Foreign Secretary containing information derived from secret German informants. They urged the British government to intensify their German-language broadcasting. Kristallnacht, they said, had caused a great revulsion among the German people and accordingly the Nazi regime had suffered a loss of prestige. This opened the possibility for British propaganda to drive a wedge between the Nazi regime and the German people. However, both suggestions to exploit Kristallnacht for the purpose of discrediting the Nazi regime in the eyes of the German public were not followed up. Whitehall felt that propaganda concerning Jews and a public condemnation of the pogrom would not only upset the Nazi regime and hence aggravate Anglo-German relations and the situation of the Jews in the Reich even further, but that it would also be resented by the German people and thus render British propaganda as a whole ineffective.

How the Nazis reacted to BBC reports about Jews was demonstrated on February 3, 1939, when the German Service told its listeners that since last September six thousand German refugees and 2,400 German refugee children had arrived in Great Britain. This is a rare and well-documented case of a BBC German broadcast concerning the Nazi persecution of the Jews and will therefore be discussed in more detail. The BBC Home Service, the German broadcast announced, would offer the same evening an electrical recording of the landing of a party of German refugee children and of their first impressions of England. The broadcast titled “Children in Flight” and transmitted at 9:25 pm was widely publicized in the BBC magazine Radio Times (including a photograph of Jewish refugee children) and in the national and regional press. The broadcast of the German Service was worded in the most inoffensive language and avoided to mention that the children were Jewish and fleeing from Nazi persecution. However, it also indirectly invited German listeners to tune in to the broadcast, as information was provided on the relevant transmitters and wavelengths. An extract of the broadcast, preserved in the Foreign Office archive, reads as follows:

Last December the BBC recording van went to Dovercourt near Harwich where refugee children from Germany are looked after as they land in England, and where they are housed in the wooden chalets of a camp built for British holiday makers. A number of recordings were made of what these children had to say about their impressions of England, and their plans for the future. A programme of
these recordings, without any commentary, is being broadcast by the BBC tonight at 9.25 p.m. G.M.T. (10.25 p.m. central European time) on the Droitwich wave length (1500 metres) and also on the medium wave length (262.1 metres). As could be expected, Berlin protested sharply and Goebbels launched yet again a retaliatory press campaign attacking British imperial history and British policy in Palestine. Several British newspapers reported on the broadcast and the Nazi reactions to it (frequently quoting a Reuter news agency message) and praised the Nazi protest as proof of the effectiveness of the BBC’s German transmissions. The Courier and Advertiser from Dundee in Scotland cited the Völkischer Beobachter saying: “Every method of wireless production was used to make political capital out of sympathy for the refugees. The broadcast was maliciously done and an indirect incitement against Germany.” The broadcast led to a diplomatic incident between Great Britain and the Third Reich; Berlin accused London of interfering illegally in internal German affairs. Whitehall took this charge seriously, as in 1936 the League of Nations had passed a “Convention on the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace” which explicitly banned broadcasts intended “to incite the population of any territory to acts incompatible with the internal order or the security of a territory of a High Contracting Power.” Ogilvie-Forbes reported that the German ambassador in London had been instructed to make representations to Halifax. The British embassy considered it unwise that the BBC had, on its own initiative, given “a propagandist value to the news.” Ogilvie-Forbes told the Foreign Office: “it was a mistake for the BBC to include in their broadcast a Jewish item of this kind which was bound to give the German Government an opportunity which was otherwise difficult to find to protest against our news bulletins. Such inclusion might weaken effect and popularity of these bulletins. I consider that we should concentrate on straight and objective news.”

It is remarkable that a British diplomat argued without a moment’s hesitation that reports about the persecution of the Jews were not “straight and objective news,” but anti-Nazi propaganda. In a further report, Ogilvie-Forbes came back to his charge that it had been a mistake of the BBC to broadcast a Jewish item, as this was “liable to […] alienate the sympathies of German listeners.” His views were widely shared inside the Foreign Office. Rex Leeper of the News Department commented: “I think the BBC were not wise in doing this & we are warning them to keep off Jews.”

Apart from the necessities of foreign policy there was yet another factor limiting the coverage of the Jewish persecution. This was the widespread belief
in Whitehall and in the BBC that the majority of Germans held anti-Semitic views and that propaganda sympathizing with Jews or appearing to be under Jewish influence was doomed to be ineffective. In August 1939 H. H. Stewart, the Director of the BBC Overseas Intelligence Department, reported after a visit to Berlin “that it was extremely damaging to mention or use talks by or about Jews [. . .]. People were still inclined to prefer anti-Jewish propaganda.”56 This view even led the BBC to decide that German-Jewish refugees should not be employed as speakers on the German Service, as it was thought that Germans were able to recognize Jews by the way they wrote or spoke.57 The fact that the Foreign Office and the BBC uncritically accepted such reports—often amounting to no more than unverified gossip—testifies to the anti-Semitic views prevailing among the British governing elite and the BBC. The allusion to “Jewish accents” belongs to the standard repertoire of anti-Semites eager to show that Jews are different from the society they live in.58 As Jean Seaton argued, “The BBC displayed, both before and during the war, views and decisions that were quite simply anti-Semitic.”59 Consequently, British propaganda never attempted to combat anti-Semitism in German society or called for sympathy for the persecuted Jews. Its main target was the mass of politically indifferent Germans, not the small minority of those critical of the Nazi regime. For this reason, the Foreign Office and the BBC also opposed direct appeals to the German people on behalf of the Jews. Christopher Warner of the News Department explained in the summer of 1939 that “any direct appeal savours of subversive propaganda [. . . W]e shall indispose more listeners than we shall appeal to by playing up to the disaffected in Germany; if they are already disaffected they are not the people whom we most want to get at.”60 Hence, while the persecution of the Jews rapidly intensified during the last months of peace, driving tens of thousands of Jews into emigration, and many into suicide, the plight of German Jewry was rarely given publicity in the BBC’s German-language broadcasts.61

EPILOGUE
Political events during 1939—the German invasion of Prague, the Allied military guarantee to Poland, and the German-Soviet non-aggression pact—soon eclipsed Kristallnacht. After the outbreak of war, the Nazis not only intensified the persecution of Jews inside the Reich, but extended it to the occupied
territories, and especially to Poland. As before, however, the ongoing Nazi persecution of the Jews enjoyed only a low priority on the British political and propaganda agenda. Although Whitehall was well informed about each new step in Nazi anti-Jewish policy, very little was reported about the systematic persecution and murder of the Jews inside the Third Reich and throughout Europe. Still, after the outbreak of war the constraints of the appeasement policy no longer applied. The BBC German Service was therefore more open in its criticism of the Nazi regime. This new liberty also found, among others, expression in the treatment of Kristallnacht.

While during 1938–39 the BBC had avoided references to the pogrom, in the first two years of the war it broadcast a number of talks and features in remembrance of Kristallnacht, which it denounced as “the biggest pogrom against Jews of all times.” On October 26, 1939 the Planning Committee of Department EH (as the British propaganda organization was called during 1939–41) discussed at length the vom Rath murder case “with a view to broadcasting the events which led to pogrom” on the occasion of the first anniversary of Kristallnacht.

On the pogrom’s first anniversary, the German Service broadcast a Sonderbericht in which a British officer, who had been in Vienna when the violence broke out, gave an account of his impressions. Offering a detailed description of the synagogue burning he witnessed, he declared that the fires had not been the acts of an angry populace but had been deliberately arranged by the Nazis. “Die Ungehängten,” a feature broadcast of mid-July 1941, described how under Himmler and Heydrich political murder and the murder of the insane and mortally ill had become daily practice in Germany. Importantly, it also described Himmler’s directive regarding the pogrom—his instructions that the wealthy and influential male Jews were to be arrested—about three thousand in every larger city—and Jewish property destroyed; that the police and fire brigades were not to aid the Jews but rather see to it that deliberately-set fires did not damage non-Jewish houses. A few months later a directive of the British propaganda organization Political Warfare Executive (PWE) for the German Service stated: “The anniversary of vom Rath”—the reference was to the November 1938 assassination in Prague of Nazi diplomat Ernst vom Rath by the Jewish youth Herschel Grynszpan, an event that served as an excuse for the November pogrom—“will enable us to stress the barbarism of reprisals on a whole people for an individual action and the conclusion that those who act on this policy unite everyone against them in hatred.”
An explanation for the curious focus on November 1938, rather than on the horrendous crimes the Nazis were committing during the war, might be that Kristallnacht had involved large numbers of German civilians witnessing what was happening to the German Jews. They could thus personally relate to what was described in the broadcasts, and hence the BBC sought to appeal to their moral conscience. In contrast, during 1939–41 Jews were not being assaulted and murdered on German streets and so the British propagandists did not consider it a useful propaganda strategy to confront the German public directly with all the details of the Nazi persecution of Polish Jews in the General Government.

CONCLUSION
Kristallnacht represented a turning point in the Nazi persecution of the Jews and an important step towards genocide. As Alan E. Steinweis argued, “It was the single instance of large-scale, public, and organized physical violence against Jews inside Germany before the Second World War. It unfolded in the open, in hundreds of German communities, even those with very few Jewish residents, and took place partly in broad daylight [. . .].” The pogrom marked the passage from economic, political and social discrimination and disenfranchisement to systematic persecution, robbery, beatings, incarceration, murder and expulsion. It was a massive, state-sponsored attack on a minority on a national scale. Since the pogrom was carried out in the full glare of world publicity—newspapers around the world reported on their front pages about the destruction of Jewish synagogues, businesses and homes, and the killing and arrest of countless Jews—ordinary people in foreign countries were confronted “for the first time with the immensity of the Jewish plight.”

Although the persecution of the Jews reached a new peak with Kristallnacht, the pogrom and its implications were not adequately reflected in the BBC’s German-language broadcasts. If Jews were mentioned at all, this was done using inoffensive language and avoiding any appearance that Great Britain was criticizing Berlin for its anti-Jewish policy. The BBC not only failed to explain to German listeners why Jews were persecuted by the Nazis, namely, for irrational racist and anti-Semitic reasons. It also failed to call on the Germans to show their sympathy for the Jews and to help stop their persecution. At no time did British broadcasts indicate that Jewish refugees were welcome in Britain or encourage their emigration.
sympathetic presentation of the refugee crisis was the Jewish children’s broadcast of February 3, 1939, which promptly roused the criticism of the Foreign Office.

The failure to report Kristallnacht and the almost complete exclusion of all Jewish topics in its aftermath cannot be explained by a lack of information, as British diplomats in Germany and the British press reported fully about the persecution. Sure, the historical evidence is fragmentary and it is possible that the BBC did broadcast more information than is known to date. It can be no coincidence, however, that an internal BBC document listing all the Sonderbericht titles of the first half of 1939 does not contain a single item on the Nazi persecution of the Jews, but as many as six items on Palestine.71

The reluctance to talk about the Jewish persecution in British propaganda must therefore be attributed to a deliberate choice on the part of the British government and the BBC. Four factors stand out: The first and most influential factor was considerations of foreign and defense policy. Chamberlain feared that public criticism of the Nazis might provoke Hitler and increase the probability of war for which Great Britain was militarily unprepared. An additional factor was British fears of alienating the Arab population in Palestine and the need to appease the governments in the Middle East and in the British Empire, on whose support Great Britain would depend in case of war with Germany. To acknowledge publicly that a “Jewish problem” existed and thus create sympathy for the Jews would only have led to public demands for the opening of Palestine to Jewish refugees. Therefore, the less said about Kristallnacht the better. A second factor was British fears of playing into the hands of Nazi propaganda, which was feverishly attacking British policy in Palestine. This campaign not only threatened London’s political influence in a region of vital strategic importance, but also sought to convince the German people of British decadence and weakness. The BBC therefore went to great lengths to explain to the German public the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine and British policy in the Mandate. A third factor was British assumptions about the spread of anti-Semitic attitudes among the German public and the belief that Germans were likely to reject propaganda concerning Jews. Most of the internal discussions did not center on the question of how Jews could be helped by giving more publicity to their plight, but whether or not the German public would react negatively to British reports about Jews. A fourth factor was latent anti-Semitism in the British government and the BBC. The very fact that “Jewish accents” were frequently reported to exist and to be easily discernible by German listeners, and that these reports were taken at their face value, can
be taken as a sign of anti-Jewish attitudes. There was little sympathy for the Jews in British government circles; many held the view that the Jews themselves were responsible for their persecution because they refused to assimilate. Whitehall feared that appeals for sympathy for, and rescue of, German Jews would lead to a resurgence of anti-Semitism among the British public.

Thus, during 1938–39 the BBC’s primary concern was not to awaken the German public to the Nazi persecution of the Jews and to appeal for their moral and material support, but to support Great Britain’s foreign policy aim of averting war with Germany. In other words, the coverage of Kristallnacht fell victim to Chamberlain’s appeasement policy.
Notes


42. “Notes of a Conversation with a German Who Occupies a Responsible Official Position, December 20, 1938,” TNA, CAB 27/627, FP (36)74, p. 23.
43. “From BBC German Broadcast of February 3rd,” TNA, FO 395/625, P 377/6/150.
46. Ogilvie-Forbes to Foreign Office, No. 56 telegraphic, February 6, 1939, TNA, FO 395/625, P 377/6/150; No. 185, February 9, 1939, TNA, FO 395/626, P 440/6/150.
51. No. 56 telegraphic, Ogilvie-Forbes to Foreign Office, February 6, 1939, TNA, FO 395/625, P 377/6/150.
52. No. 170, Ogilvie-Forbes to Halifax, February 8, 1939, TNA, FO 395/625, P 439/6/150, p. 2.
53. No. 56, Ogilvie-Forbes to Foreign Office, February 6, 1939, TNA, FO 395/625, P 377/6/150.
56. “German News,” August 25, 1939, BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Reading (BBC WAC), E 9/12/5.
57. “Bulletins in Foreign Languages,” BBC memorandum, undated, BBC WAC, R 34/325, 2; Murray to J. B. Clark, September 29, 1939, BBC WAC, R 28/270/1.
60. Minute Warner to Lord Perth, June 29, 1939, TNA, FO 395/630, P 2966/6/150.
61. For a list of the BBC's German news talks and press reviews for the period late January to mid-July 1939 see A. E. Barker, “The BBC’s German News Talks,” July 21, 1939, TNA, FO 395/631, P 3336/6/150. Likewise, a list containing suggestions for future Sonderberichte does not contain a single proposal for a talk about Jews, apart from one suggestion mentioning Jewish scientists and exiles such as Freud and Einstein: “Provision of Material for BBC German News Bulletins through Speeches and Publications,” July 24, 1939, BBC WAC, E 9/12/5. Since only few sources survived it is impossible to state with certainty how often a Jewish topic was taken up in British propaganda.
62. On the reporting of the BBC German Service on the Holocaust see Seul, “Representation.”
64. Planning and Broadcasting Committee, 37th meeting, TNA, FO 898/7, minute 14.
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