

Frank Mecklenburg, Lecture outline: Kristallnacht - 1938

Thank you for letting me commemorate with you what happened 87 years ago in Germany. Thank you Mark Hamburg for inviting me to share some thoughts about the events in Germany in November of 1938 and to allow me to think about the larger context of the entire year of 1938 and the time of Nazi oppression in Germany.

I work at the Leo Baeck Institute, Archive and Library for the history and culture of German speaking Jews, at the Center for Jewish History at 15 West 16th Street. In the Archives, you find, for instance, the papers of Rabbi Lehman, who served this congregation for many years at a time when the survivors were carrying their experiences and memories, and the second generation was witness to their stories, and now is being conveyed to the children and grandchildren.

November 9/10, 1938, was a nationwide catastrophe for the Jews, it found global attention, dramatic newspaper reports and has become the iconic event about the beginning of the end, foreshadowing the Holocaust. The reports about the destruction on and after of Kristallnacht were alarming, 1,400 synagogues and prayer rooms destroyed, cemeteries ransacked,

7,000 businesses destroyed or taken away, 30,000 men arrested, deported

and detained in the notorious German concentration camps, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Dachau, to name only a few. It is impossible to know how many people were killed, there is no reliable information, hundreds of suicides.

What happened in November 1938 was a surprise, Kristallnacht is what many people associate with the Nazi brutality of that year, sometimes called the catastrophe before the catastrophe, when less than a year later Germany started the war against the world, World War II. The attacks against the Jews and the destruction of synagogues and private properties were committed by the Nazi Party militarized organizations, the Storm Troopers and the Brown Shirt, the SS and the SA.

However, I want to talk about how the iconic events of Kristallnacht were preceded by developments and events that are less well known but are essential to understand what happened at Kristallnacht.

In March of that year was "Anschluss", mainly in Vienna in Austria, the occupation of Austria by German forces on March 13. Along with the cheers of the Christian Austrian population welcoming the Germans, the

Christian population also, in large numbers, without directly being asked

by the occupiers, spontaneously came to attack their Jewish neighbors, with full force. This was what characterizes a pogrom, which had been known in Eastern Europe for some time, but was not typical for Central Europe. That changed in March 1938, it was a definite turning point.

Attacks against Jews and their businesses had happened in Austria, and in Germany, already before "Anschluss", but random and few and far between. On March 13 and several more days thereafter, 70,000 people were arrested, 8,000 businesses destroyed and dispossessed, hundreds if not thousands committed suicide.

So, was Kristallnacht a surprise, or was it?

Kristallnacht has often been characterized as a pogrom. However, November 9/10 was a well-organized attack on the Jews, whereas March 13ff. in Vienna was indeed a pogrom. The occupation of Austria was well organized by the Nazis, the Austrian population was largely jubilant, but the atrocities against the Jews of Vienna, where the vast majority of Austrian Jews lived, was largely perpetrated by the local population,

without interference by the authorities, which is what characterizes a pogrom.

The surprise is that March 1938 in Vienna was a trigger event. Post-war Austrians, for a long time, claimed for themselves to have been "The First Victim", but not the Christians, but the Jews in fact. The consequences were a big surprise to the Nazi regime in Berlin, who five years after the end of the Weimar Republic in late January 1933, with more or less comparatively careful attempts to go after the Jews, had no idea that what they saw in Vienna was possible. Adolf Eichmann was sent to Vienna on March 16, 1938, three days after the "Anschluss" and started to build the organized expulsion and destruction of the Jews.

It is important to understand some of the characteristics of the Nazi regime, the public image of Germany as an orderly country with rules and laws that the Nazi rule operated under. The amount of legislation, new laws and regulations filled many volumes, many of them regarding Jews (the Jewish Museum in Berlin has a display of many hanging banners with long lists of anti-Jewish stipulations). In reality, it was the rule of the Nazi party and its organizations, not the state as was known during the Weimar

Republic (there is the book by Ernst Fraenkel, The Dual State, written

during the 1930s in Germany, finished and published in US emigration in 1941), the Nazis maintained a cover of legality and legitimacy, which was held as widespread common belief during the early years, for instance in 1936 with the Olympics taking place in Germany.

Also important to note, in the beginning in 1933, the full force of repression went against the political opposition, Jewish and non-Jewish, the enemies of the regime were initially the prime targets of the Nazi regime, and which generated the first large and urgent wave of refugees from Germany, mainly to the surrounding countries, such as Austria, Czechoslovakia, France, etc.

But throughout the years of Nazi rule, there were many local atrocities against Jews, even during 1938, after Anschluss and before Kristallnacht, in May and June of 1938 with deportations to concentration camps of so-called slackers, asocials, Jews and non-Jews, thousands, significant in numbers, but not widely known or recognized.

The year 1938 was for the Jews of Europe, Central Europe as well as Eastern Europe, a significant turning point, a dramatic shift when looking

at the beginning of the year from the end of the year, the increasing violence and mass persecution, a major turn in emigration and expulsion, and the rejection of Jewish refugees by the world community.

The dynamic of the year 1938 started at the end of '37 with a crisis in Romania, the threat of expulsion of non-Romanian Jews, refugees from the frontlines of World War I. The League of Nations, set up after World War One to deal with international affairs, the less effective precursor of the United Nations after World War Two, scheduled an emergency conference for April '38 to discuss and deal with the Romanian Jewish refugee crisis. That conference did not take place, but instead a conference was suggested by US President Roosevelt and scheduled for July to deal with the March 38 crisis. That was the beginning, two refugee crises, that was the beginning of many to follow.

What is widely recognized as major events in 1938?

March-German occupation of Austria, Vienna pogrom, Jews have to get out quickly

July 6-15-international conference in Evian at Lake Geneva to solve refugee crisis resulting from Vienna in March. Big disappointment since countries pull back and do not or no longer admit refugees.

September 30-Munich conference, Germany threatened war, instead was allowed to occupy Czechoslovakian border lands, the Sudeten crisis, called the appeasement, but only encouraged Germany to expand further, and resulting in more Jewish refugees

Late October - expulsion of 17,000 Polish Jews from Germany, who were not allowed to enter Poland and were trapped between the two countries for several months

November - Kristallnacht

And in December - Kindertransport, the British government allows for 10,000 Jewish children to come to UK, but also a few hundred children to go to Sweden, Switzerland, France and Holland. This rescue operation

stopped in August 1939 when the War broke out on September 1.

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How and when did the world take notice?

Kristallnacht was reported across the globe as a nationwide event by news media as well as the foreign diplomatic offices in Germany including occupied Austria, whereas March 13, 1938, when Germany occupied Austria, the world noticed the jubilant Austrian population welcoming Adolf Hitler, but basically ignored what happened to the Jews in Austria.

With one exception, the New York based Jewish Telegraphic Agency, JTA,

which had correspondents all over the world and which reported by wire in daily bulletins what happened to the Jews in Austria, along with other newsworthy messages from around the world. JTA is a wire service and mainly read by other news media, but also various types of organizations.

Attrocities against Jews happened almost exclusively in Vienna where the vast majority of Jews lived, and which therefore seemed to be a local event, largely executed by the Christian population against their Jewish

compatriots in the midst of their elated sense of the new situation.

Major Consequences

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By November 9/10, the rules that had guided emigration had changed, harsh quotas, by the US, for instance, never filled the limited quotas for Germans, due to the consequences of Anschluss and the subsequent Evian conference, after which letting in Jewish refugees had stopped with most countries.

The central issue of the year for the Jews in Germany was how escape and emigration had changed in the course of 1938.

One third of German Jews had left by the end of 1937, (that is between 135,000 and 160,000, there are differing counts) mostly young people for obvious lack of any future prospects, the largest share went to Palestine, more than 50,000. The occupation of Austria, however, added 200,000 Jews to the expanded Germany, plus there were also 175,000 people of mixed parentage, "mischlings", looked at by the Nazis as Jews and by the Jews as non-Jews.

At the conference at Evian, the assembled countries made immigration more difficult or even closed their doors, which signaled to the Nazis to

change their strategy from encouraging emigration to forced emigration.

Why a turning point?

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1938 in view of previous 5 years of Nazi rule in Germany proper, looking at the beginning from the end of the year. Germany had begun to expand, Austria, Czech borderlands, and at the same time, it had become increasingly difficult for Jews to find countries of immigration. Already in the beginning of 1938, the Nazi regime did not allow Jews who had travelled abroad to return to Germany.

After the incarceration of thousands of Jews in concentration camp, if the families could manage to find an escape, find sponsors, people would be released from the camps.

The end of the year

After many terrible enactments of discrimination and persecution, there at the end of 1938 comes "Kindertransport", resulting in the rescue of 10,000 children, granted by the British government, with smaller groups of children going to Sweden, Switzerland, France, however, most of the children did not see their parents again.

This was a spectacular rescue effort on behalf of a government, whereas the U.S. did not engage in such measures. We can maybe talk about the complications that prevented the US from following those rescue

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measures. However, there were the non-governmental actors, to name the Quakers, but also other groups, in UK, in US, that we know less about and historians are researching and discovering other efforts.