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8-10 November: Organised pogroms against the German Jewish population

Since the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, the situation for the Jewish population in Germany has markedly deteriorated. Even though there are only approximately 560,000 Germans of the Jewish faith living in the German Reich, Nazi propaganda holds this small group responsible for all the evils facing the country. Jews, as well as the so-called jüdische Mischlinge (Jewish Mischlings), or mixed-bloods, are humiliated, disenfranchised and robbed economically. Public servants and officials of the Jewish faith are fired, lawyers have their licence to practice withdrawn, sportspeople and athletes are expelled from their clubs, Jewish school and university students are refused access to educational institutions and schools. Jewish businesses no longer receive contracts; the SA (Sturmabteilung or 'Brown-shirts') prevent non-Jewish Germans from shopping in Jewish shops across the country. In this way, around 40 percent of Jewish Germans feel compelled to leave Germany by 1938. Jews who choose to leave the country, however, have to sell their shops far below value, and can take almost no possessions with them to their new country. The houses and household goods of Jews that have been driven out are auctioned off. Proceeds from the sale of shops, houses and private property largely go to the state. The forced sale of Jewish property to German buyers below value, and through state confiscation for the common use, is described as Aryanisation. Hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish Germans profit from this Aryanisation, the dismissal of public servants and the employment ban placed on Jewish lawyers, and they express their thanks to the Nazi regime through their loyalty. Furthermore, the Aryanisation proves to be a welcome source of income for the Reich which was becoming increasingly indebted as a result of the build-up of arms and social benefits for the so-called ethnic Germans living beyond the borders of the Reich.



Herschel Grynszpan is a 17-year old Polish Jew, who was born and grew up in Hanover. At 15 years of age, he had fled to France from the repression in Germany. In October 1938, the German government deports 15,000 Jews of Polish descent in an operation called Polenaktion (operation against Poles). Polish authorities are completely overstretched by the situation, and officials at some border crossings refuse to allow the expellees to enter the country, despite the individuals having been deported overnight without warning, money or preparation of any form. Many of the expellees are forced to live in improvised camps. When Herschel Grynszpan hears that his parents are also among those who have been deported, he feels compelled to take a desperate stand. On 7 November, Grynszpan attempts to assassinate a German diplomat, Ernst Eduard



vom Rath, an avowed Nazi, in Paris. The diplomat dies of his injuries on 9 November. This assassination becomes the pretext for long-planned pogroms across the entire country. The press immediately reports the event in Paris in extensive detail. The Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels speaks out publicly about a jüdischen Weltverschwörung (Jewish world conspiracy) that is behind the assassination. SA storm troopers seek to stir up allegedly spontaneous Volkszorn (public anger) among non-Jewish Germans everywhere. Nazi regional leaders and SA leaders organise and carry out attacks on a local and regional level against Jewish shops, houses or apartments and synagogues. Fire brigades are instructed only to extinguish fires if the houses of so-called 'Aryan' Germans are put in danger; police are under orders not to help any Jews involved. The first attacks occur on 8 November. Most incidents take place through the night of 9 to 10 November. The attacks last through until 13 November. In this Reich's Night of Pogroms, which is often downplayed with the description 'Night of Broken Glass', a total of some 400 people lose their lives, over a thousand synagogues and prayer-houses are burned to the ground, and numerous Jews are arrested. Herschel Grynszpan is murdered by the Nazis in the period between 1942 and 1945.



The November pogroms are one of those profoundly depressing examples of human malice that can sometimes make the job of a historian to look into the past deeply painful. By and large, the perpetrators are organised and committed Nazis, as well as local criminals with an eye to personal gain. Nonetheless, the majority of Germans make themselves complicit when they opportunistically choose to look away. However, just as in every historical situation, there are exceptions on this occasion. Some non-Jewish Germans hide their innocent, persecuted neighbours and, in some places, the non-Jewish officials simply do not follow orders, and do not fulfil their duty. In this way, for example, the head of the local Berlin Police Precinct 16, Senior Lieutenant Wilhelm Krützfeld, together with other policemen, prevents the destruction of the New Synagogue in Oranienburger Street, by determinedly confronting the arsonists from the SA. He forces the fire brigade to extinguish the fire. Krützfeld survives the war and continues to work in the Soviet sector after 1945.

It is appropriate to be careful when making comparisons between today and times past. On the one hand, every historical situation is unique; on the other hand, history is always simply an interpretation of the past. Nevertheless, structural parallels do stand out and give rise to further reflection. Just like Herschel Grynszpan's parents, people are once again living today under shameful conditions behind closed borders, because no one is willing to or wants to take them in. Once more, regimes that appear to draw their legitimacy from the marginalisation of entire sections of the population are growing in strength and influence. In today's Europe, there are states yet again where physical or character traits are assigned to people on the basis of their religion, where full participation in public life is effectively refused on the grounds of their faith, their political attitudes, their sexual orientation or their ethnicity. Even in the European Union (EU) there are countries once again in which armed hordes beat up and drive away Jews, Sinti and Roma without fear of prosecution. In some EU countries, individuals are fearful of losing their jobs at universities, or as editors at newspapers, in radio or television if they voice or openly display their opinion or their religion. The crimes of German Nazism would be trivialised if one attempted to

draw parallels here. However, remembering the origins of German Nazism and its victims may be a reminder of what happens if democracy is not defended and left to the mercy of its opponents.

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