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MLA Citation:

Print. Literature in Context.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

KRISTALLNACHT (9 NOVEMBER 1938)

Recriminations against the Jews in Germany began as soon as Hitler and the Nazi Party took power in January 1933. Emboldened by his successes in annexing territory at Munich, in September 1938 Hitler intensified his anti-Semitic policies by expelling 18,000 German Jews who had been born in the Polish provinces of the former Russian empire, even though they had been living in Germany since the end of World War I. These people were deported to the eastern border of Germany and told to leave the country. Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer notes that even though they were denied passage into Poland by the Poles, "many were nevertheless forced across the border illegally by the Nazis; others, some 5,000, to camp in a tiny Polish frontier village, Zbyszyn."

Left to manage for themselves in rustic Polish frontier towns, the Jews suffered greatly. One of these victims, Zindel Grynszpan, sent a postcard to his son, Hirsh, who was studying in Paris. Enraged by the deplorable conditions his family had been forced to endure, on 9 November 1938 Hirsh went to the German embassy in Paris and shot the first German official that he could find, Ernst vom Rath.

Bauer argues that vom Rath’s death turned out to be a convenient excuse for the Nazis to punish the Jewish people in Germany. Bauer observes that some sort of recrimination had already been planned before vom Rath’s shooting. On the night of 9 November, Hitler and Josef Goebbels met to discuss the “proper” response to this murder. Goebbels, eager to lead on the Jewish Question, “activated the SA and tens of thousands of loyal party members to burn all the synagogues in Germany, destroy and loot Jewish shops, and physically abuse large numbers of Jews.” The SA were Sturmabteilung (or the Stormtroopers), who were also known as the Brownshirts for the uniforms they wore. Hitler had formed this group of fanatical fascists on 3 August 1921 to control members of his own Nazi Party and to harass opponents. These men were the official bullies of the party and the Nazis’ primary source of physical abuse against the Jewish people.
Martin Gilbert describes the destruction that occurred during the Kristallnacht recriminations:

In twenty-four hours of street violence, ninety-one Jews were killed. More than thirty thousand—one in ten of those who remained—were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Before most of them were released two to three months later, as many as a thousand had been murdered, 244 of them in Buchenwald. A further eight thousand Jews were evicted from Berlin: children from orphanages, patients from hospitals, old people from old people homes. There were many suicides, ten at least in Nuremberg; but it was forbidden to publish death notices in the press.

It was not by the killing, however, nor by the arrests or the suicides, that the night of November 9 was to be remembered. During the night, as well as breaking into tens of thousands of shops and homes, the Stormtroopers set fire to one hundred and ninety-one synagogues; or, if it was thought that fire might endanger nearby buildings, smashed the synagogues as thoroughly as possible with hammers and axes.7

As one would imagine from such demolition, the streets of Germany were full of broken glass that the Nazis used derisively as a symbol of their punishing of the Jews. This night, 9 November 1938, thus became known as Kristallnacht, or the “night of broken glass.”

A majority of German citizens were shocked by this violence against the Jews—although there was little assistance given to the victims.8 Gilbert conveys a poignant story about one German gentile, Pastor J. Von Jan, who spoke out against the tyranny. This pastor’s vicarage was destroyed by the SA, and he was sent to prison as well.9

Bauer notes three significant changes in social policy against the German Jewish population after Kristallnacht. First, the Germans worked out a completely new Jewish policy after this incident that had not been in place before. Second, the Jews were forced to pay the Nazis one billion Reichsmarks for the death of vom Rath. They also had to pay insurance benefits for the destroyed property because the German insurance companies were upset over the amount of damages incurred (250 million Reichsmarks). Third, the Jews were disenfranchised completely from Germany’s economy.10 Gilbert observes that German Jewish children were also now com-
pletely barred from public schools. Bauer writes that by 1 January 1939, only Jewish-run organizations could hire Jews, and that if a business was taken over by Germans, then no Jewish person could work for that company again. The ultimate goal of this process was to force all Jews out of the country. The results were panic and a massive migration of Jews, people who had once been good citizens of either Germany or Austria.

THE NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS

When the Allies were liberating the concentration camps at the end of the war, the most notorious image of the remains of Nazi Germany were photographs of the hollow-faced survivors of the Holocaust.

From as early as 1921, Hitler warned the world that concentration camps would be a major part of his new society. Almost immediately after coming to power, the SA established small detention centers throughout Germany. Gilbert notes that on 9 March 1933, a scant two months after Hitler took national power, “the SS sent thousands of critics of the regime, including many Jews, to a so-called ‘concentration camp,’ at Dachau, near Munich.” Dachau was the first major concentration center, expanding to accommodate 5,000 prisoners by the end of March. Other state-sponsored camps quickly sprang up throughout Germany. By the early fall of 1934, fully 80,000 people had been incarcerated.

The biggest impetus for the Nazi concentration camp system occurred in May 1934 when the SS took over operation from the SA, and they consolidated most of the camps into larger concentrations. Theodor Eicke, the former head of the Dachau camp, was appointed by Himmler to the position of Inspector of Concentration Camps. His job was to reorganize the system. A highly competent administrator, Eicke closed all the SA camps, standardized the operations of the camp system, and created the SS Death’s Head guards. The administration of the camps remained under the control of Eicke, and the Gestapo was in charge of the incarceration and release of prisoners. By the early summer of 1935 five major camps existed in Germany: Esterwegen, Lichtenburg, Moringen, Dachau, and Sachsenburg.

Buchenwald was created in the summer of 1937 near Weimar in