

**Title: The Effect of U.S Media Coverage of Kristallnacht**

**Research Question: How did United States media react to *Kristallnacht* in 1938 and how did this affect U.S policy and action toward Germany?**

**Subject: History**

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## Introduction

The Holocaust was a very traumatizing but crucial part of our history which led to World War II, and shaped our world for what it would become. The persecution of Jews that resulted in the murder of more than 6 million Jewish people was Adolf Hitler's "final resolution" for Germany. Adolf Hitler had always had a deep hatred for Jews and he expressed this in his book, "Mein Kampf", which translates to "My Struggle" or "My Fight". In his book, he shares his loathing of Jews, homosexuals, and the disabled. He saw these people as inferior to Germans, and wrote about his "final solution", which was to exterminate all those inferior to him, including Jews. When Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, he was one step closer to fulfilling his lifelong dream. As Chancellor and leader of the NSDAP party, or Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, also known as the NAZI Party, Hitler would gather support from his followers who shared the same beliefs as him in the effort to make his "final solution" a reality. Hitler and the Nazis would eventually succeed in exterminating 6 million Jews before they were stopped.<sup>1</sup> They did this in many ways, including gas chambers, working them to death, letting them starve to death in concentration camps or ghettos, and simply shooting them in public.

Many events that occurred early on in Hitler's rule would set the stage for the rest of the horrific events that occurred afterward, one of the most important of these being *Kristallnacht*, or

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<sup>1</sup> "Third Reich: An Overview" United States Holocaust Museum, 2017

the night of the broken glass. In the late night of November 9<sup>th</sup> and early hours of November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1938, Nazis and German citizens instituted the most violent pogrom toward Jews in history. *Kristallnacht* was a result of public outburst after the assassination of Ernst Vom Rath. Vom Rath was a German embassy official who was stationed in Paris. Herschel Grynszpan, a 17 year old Polish Jew, shot Vom Rath after receiving news that his parents were expelled from the Reich along with thousands of other Polish Jews living in Germany. After the assassination of Vom Rath, the Nazi party chose to commemorate him by launching a night of excessive antisemitism. Joseph Goebbels, propaganda minister, played a big part in instigating this antisemitism as he stated that all Jews had conspired to commit this assassination and announced that, "the Führer has decided that ... demonstrations should not be prepared or organized by the Party, but insofar as they erupt spontaneously, they are not to be hampered."<sup>2</sup> Goebbels' speech served as an order to unleash violence on the Jewish community. Party leaders instructed their local offices to destroy anything and everything that had to do with Jews, and even had officers dress up as civilians to support the belief that it was a result of "public sentiment". On this dreadful night, over 1,000 Jewish synagogues were burned to the ground, over 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed, 91 Jewish people were killed, and about 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and taken to concentration camps. The name *Kristallnacht* originated from the broken shards of glass that were left on the ground from the looting and destruction of Jewish communities.<sup>3</sup>

U.S. involvement in the Holocaust was minimal at first, which allowed Hitler and the Nazis to do so much damage to the Jewish population before the world took action against them.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>"Kristallnacht" United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2017

Prior to Kristallnacht, the United States had been a bit oblivious toward the antisemitism occurring in Europe. President Franklin D Roosevelt and congress could have made many decisions that would have helped Jews in Europe, however chose to remain silent while Jews were persecuted. The assumption would be that after the horrifying events that occurred during *Kristallnacht*, the United States government would take action to help the Jewish people, however they faced barriers and challenges that would make them question whether or not it would actually benefits not only Jews but themselves.

In an era before the internet and all of the advanced technology that we have now, people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century obtained their information on the Holocaust, through newspaper, radio broadcasts, and newsreels. The way in which media decided to cover *Kristallnacht* and the Holocaust formed our perspective and opinion about it and would later influence the United States' policies and government action toward Germany, or lack thereof.

## **Newspapers**

The most common way that Americans were kept informed in 1938 were newspapers. Newspapers began in 1690 and had proved a reliable and valid source of information for Americans since then. Local newspapers which were around during that time included *The Colorado Springs Gazette* and *Pikes Peak Press*. The Colorado Springs Gazette was first started in 1873 and is still a very popular newspaper today. The Pikes Peak Press was also first printed in the 1870's however it does no longer exist. As far as local newspapers, these were the two with the most coverage on *Kristallnacht* during that time. Many national newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *The Cincinnati Enquirer* published multiple articles regarding the persecution of Jews and the violence they had endured. "The Night of the Broken Glass" made newspaper headlines the very next day, however it was not known as *Kristallnacht* until many

years later. At this time, newspaper articles referred to the events of that night as “persecution of Jews” and “destruction of Jewish property”.<sup>4</sup>

One article titled, “Ghetto for German Jews May Be Set up by Nazis”, coming from the Colorado Springs Gazette and published on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1938, a couple of days after the pogrom, gives details about what happened that night and the results of it for Jewish people.<sup>5</sup> This article says that the arrests made during *Kristallnacht* led to Nazis having to have too many Jewish prisoners, so the Nazis contemplated then eventually fulfilled the idea of setting up Ghettos for these prisoners. Another article published in an issue of the Colorado Springs Gazette on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1938 titled, “Nazi Persecution of Jews is Scathingly Denounced”<sup>6</sup>, not only talks about the hate crime which occurred on the night of November 9<sup>th</sup>, but also gives other evidence of how the Nazis were carrying out their hate and antisemitism toward the Jewish community. This article also discusses the possibility of United States action in Germany, but does not give any examples or suggestions to the public for what they could have done to help the Jews being terrorized in Europe.

The *Pikes Peak Press* published an article in the November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1938 issue titled, “Danger of ‘Jewish Problem’ For United States in German ‘Purge’” focuses on the possible long-term effects *Kristallnacht* would have, especially the impact on the United States.<sup>7</sup> This article states that because of *Kristallnacht*, it was predicted that the U.S would get hundreds of

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<sup>4</sup> “Local and National Responses” Holocaust and Humanity, 2008

<sup>5</sup> “Ghetto for German Jews May Be Set Up by Nazis .” Colorado Springs Gazette , 12 Nov. 1938, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> “Nazi Persecution of Jews is Scathingly Denounced.” Pikes Peak Press, 11 Nov. 1938, Accessed 4 Aug. 2017.

<sup>7</sup> “Danger of ‘Jewish Problem’ for United States in German ‘Purge’” Pikes Peak Press. Nov 13, 1938. P. 8

thousands more refugees fleeing to the United States. Jews were referred to as a “problem” in this article and since the public trusted this media coverage, they would soon see Jews as a problem for them too.

The *New York Times* was the most popular national newspaper of that time and every week published issues that would maintain the public informed of what was occurring in Europe. Despite this, there were very few articles that talked about *Kristallnacht* in the *Times*. One titled, “Nazis Smash, Loot and Burn Jewish Shops and Temples until Goebbels Calls Halt”, was published the very next day after “the night of the broken glass”, and only talks about the statistics of what occurred in the Jewish community on November 9<sup>th</sup>, but does not talk about the aftermath of *Kristallnacht* or the effects of it. Another article published in the *Times*, “Jews Are Ordered to Leave Munich”<sup>9</sup>, also published directly after on November 11<sup>th</sup>, sort of does this by explaining what occurred to Jews after the destruction of their property. This article discusses all of the damage done, the crowds that gathered the day after to see the annihilation of their communities, and the banishment of Jews in Munich. A third article published a few days later on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, “Arrests Continue”<sup>10</sup> gives the public information about all of the arrests of Jews and the continuance of them which was leading to the filling up of the Ghettos set up for Jewish prisoners, where they would await to be taken to concentration camps to either enter the gas chamber and be killed, or be forced to work until they died.

While all of these newspaper articles were very informative to the public, they were not helpful in allowing the public to see just how cruel *Kristallnacht* was toward the Jewish

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<sup>8</sup> “Nazis Smash, Loot And Burn Jewish Shops And Temples Until Goebbels Calls Halt” The New York Times, November 11, 1938

<sup>9</sup> “Jews Ordered to Leave Munich.” The New York Times, 11 Nov. 1938, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> “In 1938, the World Knew.” The New York Times, 8 Nov. 1988. P.1

community. Numbers on paper were not representative of women and children being shot in the head, or businesses burned down that people worked their entire lives for and made a living off of, or the arrests of innocent men who were simply arrested and taken away from their families because of their beliefs. Numbers and facts were not representative of these cruel realities, and American newspaper journalists in 1938 failed to see this, which could have been pure obliviousness, or plain ignorance.

Many years later, after the Holocaust had ended and half of the Jewish population had been exterminated, U.S journalists realized the terrible coverage that had occurred and reflected on it in multiple articles. One published in *The New York Times* in November 8<sup>th</sup> 1988, almost 50 years after *Kristallnacht* was titled “In 1938, the World Knew” and criticizes the lack of action taken to stop the Holocaust after *Kristallnacht*, and recognizes that the lack of personal coverage done by newspapers played a part in the lack of action. Another article reflecting back on *Kristallnacht* on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of it, was titled “From the Archive: *Kristallnacht*”, and was published in an issue of *The Guardian*, a more recent newspaper. This article remembers not only the physical damage done on that night, but also the emotional damage done and the victims of Jewish oppression that occurred.

### **Radio Broadcasts**

The first radio broadcast was aired in 1906, in Massachusetts, and would become a very popular media for both news and leisure. In 1938, radio broadcasts were around, but not yet as popular to the public as they became in the following years. One broadcast that was popular around the nation was the word of Charles Coughlin, who was an American- Canadian Priest from 1901-1939. Father Coughlin was a very controversial radio figure because of his anti-Semitic views and preference for speaking about politics rather than religious matters. In one of

his broadcasts, “Jews Support Communism” which aired the day after *Kristallnacht*. In this broadcast, Father Coughlin spotlights his anti-Semitic views and directs the nation to turn Jews away from the United States, as he thought they would bring communism with them.<sup>11</sup> Since communism in the U.S was a prominent fear in 1938, Father Coughlin appealed to this by accusing Jews of supporting communism to turn the nation against refugees.

While religious figures such as Father Coughlin were focused on political matters, news radio stations were focused on a domestic threat, or what seemed like one at the time. In October of 1938, a couple weeks before *Kristallnacht* occurred, Orson Welles gave a radio broadcast, “The War of the Worlds” which warned Americans that aliens were coming to take over the world. The broadcast caused a lot of commotion for the months to come and the nation was filled with a range of emotions because of Wells’ warning. No matter how absurd or realistic this may have seemed, one thing about this was definitely absurd: radio stations and citizens were more worried about a possible dilemma than the torture that their fellow humans were enduring.

Much like newspapers, radio broadcasts realized their mistakes much later. NPR, or National Public Radio first aired in 1970 and has been serving Americans with many kinds of informative and leisurely radio broadcasts and is thought to be a reliable outlet for information. This particular broadcast, aired in 2013 was called “75 Years Ago, Kristallnacht Presaged the Holocaust”, and looked back on the long-term effects and outcomes of *Kristallnacht* and much like the more current newspaper article, regretted the United States’ decision to do nothing to help the Jews.

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<sup>11</sup> “Jews Support Communism.” *Father Caughlin Archives*. November 12, 1938

## Newsreels

Much like radio broadcasts, television news was a new and upcoming source of information in 1938, with the first airing of it being in 1929, in New York City. Since there weren't very many television news channels, the most popular form of television news coverage were newsreels. Newsreels were segments on television that included not only political news but entertainment and other aspects of life. One particular newsreel that was popular in 1938 was Fox Movietone News. In the November 1938 episode, there was a segment titled "America Condemns Nazi Terrorism".<sup>12</sup> This episode was broadcasted following *Kristallnacht* and was essentially a verbal condemnation by former President Herbert Hoover, democratic presidential candidate in 1928 Alfred E. Smith, and republican presidential candidate in 1936 Alf M. Lando. These three men address the nation by saying essentially the same thing in different ways: persecution of the Jews in Germany is frowned upon by Americans and Germany's actions are intolerable. (See Appendices A-C)

Another popular newsreel in 1938 was Universal Newsreel, which also covered many different areas in everyday life. Their coverage of *Kristallnacht* was similar to that of Fox Movietone in that their segment, "FDR Leads Nation in Protest against Nazi Persecutions", focuses on the response of important figures in the U.S including Herbert Hoover, president of Fordham University Father Robert I Gannon, and New York Methodist Bishop Edwin H. Hughes. (See appendices D-F) This newsreel was almost the same as the Fox Movietone one in that it was a few short segments of important figures who talked about their disgust with the

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<sup>12</sup>"America Condemns Nazi Persecutions" *Fox Movietone*. November 12, 1938.

Nazi's latest actions toward Jews. In fact, Hoovers speech was the exact same except for a few words and it was shortened. These leaders didn't promise any action or help toward the Jews, but rather expressed their disappointment toward Germany as a country, and looked away from the true problem.

### **Political Action & Policies**

However the media covered and chose to interpret *Kristallnacht* would be how not only the public but also how the government would interpret it. This interpretation would lead Franklin D Roosevelt, which was president at the time, and congress to make decisions regarding the American involvement in Nazi Germany as well as domestic policies on refugees and immigration. The media did not react personally to *Kristallnacht* and they only gave the public general information about the victims. Instead of focusing on the impact on the Jewish community, the media in the United States chose to focus on the political outcomes for the United States. Journalists also failed to recognize that this pogrom toward Jews was motivated by the true, deep hatred that Hitler and Nazis had toward them. Since the media focused on these possible immigration and refugee problems, this is also what the president and government focused on.

Immediately after *Kristallnacht*, President Franklin Roosevelt responded with a verbal condemnation toward Hitler and the Nazis, and took two actions. The first of these was that he called the U.S ambassador to return from Germany for "consultations", when in reality he simply wanted him out of Germany so that he was not in potential danger. The second action he took was to extend the visitors visas of about 12,000 German Jewish Refugees in the United States, in order to keep them away from the persecution they would face if they were forced to return to Germany. Members of congress interested in helping German Jewry proposed a bill that would

increase the quota of children refugees allowed into the United States by 20,000. This bill was sponsored by Senator Robert Wagner and representative Edith Rogers, but this bill was met by ferocious opposition from nativists and isolationists. A representative of their perspective, Roosevelt's own cousin and wife of the U.S. Commissioner of Immigration at the time, Laura Delano Houghteling, said that those "20,000 charming children would all too soon grow into 20,000 ugly adults." Polls were also taken and revealed that most Americans were opposed to more immigration, convincing Roosevelt to satisfy the public. Without his support and so much opposition, the Wagner-Rogers bill died in committee.<sup>13</sup> Other American Jewish organizations attempted to help their fellow Jews by proposing a bill that would allow 81,000 German Jews into the United States immediately, but that bill was also rejected by the government. Among the few who supported an increase in immigration was Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, who proposed a plan to the Alaskan Territory's Chamber of Commerce that would resettle German and Austrian Jewish refugees in Alaska. This plan however, was only approved by three out of the seven Alaskan Chambers of Commerce, and was therefore rejected. President Roosevelt even asked his closest Jewish advisor, Samuel Rosenman, if he should ease up on the immigration laws and allow more refugees in, Rosenman advised against them because he thought that a "Jewish problem" would arise in the United States. One last attempt was made by Jews to flee to America, in May of 1939, 6 months after *Kristallnacht* occurred, when nearly one thousand Jews boarded the German transatlantic liner the *St. Louis* and set sail for Havana, Cuba. Most of the passengers had obtained American visas and Cuban landing certificates, as they planned to land in Cuba and then continue their journey to reach the United States, however shortly before the ship sailed, the Cuban president at the time, Federico Laredo Bru, invalidated every one of these

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

certificates and did not inform the passengers of this. So when they arrived hopeful in Havana, only 28 of the 937 total passengers were allowed into Cuba while the rest were forced to sail back to Germany and remain under Nazi rule. A telegram was sent to President Roosevelt asking if he would accept the remaining refugees, but was never answered, leaving the German and Austrian Jews back in the hands of those who abhorred them.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, after many possible ideas President Roosevelt and the U.S government did almost nothing to help Jews being persecuted in Europe, even after the violence shown on *Kristallnacht*.

## **Conclusion**

All of these failed and refused actions to help those being persecuted, would soon lead to their suffering and possible death, and was in part due to the unsympathetic media coverage of *Kristallnacht*. Not one of the newspaper articles suggested that we should have helped the Jews flee from Europe, American journalists did not see the reality of what they were facing with a leader that wanted to abolish their population. Radio stations chose to focus on supernatural threats rather than real threats in the world. The coverage that lacked a personal aspect and referred to Jewish refugees as a problem for the United States led not only U.S citizens but also the leaders to believe this, and believe that they should step back from Germany and let Hitler do what he thought was right. No one saw that *Kristallnacht* would foreshadow the rest of the cruel inhumane things that occurred during the Holocaust, and this underplayed reaction to this pogrom, would leave the United States as a bystander who did nothing and make them guilty in a way for what Hitler and the Nazis did to the Jewish population during the Holocaust. Everyone knows what would follow after *Kristallnacht*: the interment of Jews into concentration camps,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

the murders in the gas chambers, the piles of bodies in holes dug specifically for all of the murdered corpses, and many, many more atrocities that Jews would face under the rule of Adolf Hitler. All of the media outlets that talked about *Kristallnacht* underestimated Hitler and the Nazis, and this would lead both the U.S public and government to also underestimate their power and evil, which led them to remain stubborn with their immigration policies, take no action in Germany to help Jews, and remain silent when they knew something was wrong in Hitler's dictatorship. This ultimately made the United States partially responsible for the 6 million murders of the Jewish community which they would only recognize until after all of the horrific things happened, even though they did indeed, have a warning that this was coming, and that warning was *Kristallnacht* but the poor media coverage and lack of it forbid them from seeing this.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Herbert Hoover's in Fox Movietone Newsreel: *America Condemns Nazi Terrorism*

“Americans are and should be indignant at the terrible outbreak of Jewish persecution in Germany and the attacks upon the Christian faith. This represents an attack of the brutal intolerance which has no parallel in modern history except possibly the destruction of religious worship in Russia by the Bolsheviks. This rise of intolerance in Germany today, the suffering being inflicted on an innocent and helpless people grieves every decent American. It raises our every sense of indignation and our every resentment. It makes us fearful for the whole progress of civilization. It is our hope that those springs of tolerance and morals in the human compassion which lie deep in the German people may yet rise to control. But in the meantime our condemnation of these leadership be without reserve. They are bringing to Germany a moral isolation from the entire world.”

### Appendix B: Alfred E. Smith in Fox's speech Movietone Newsreel: *America Condemns Nazi Terrorism*

“Those of us that believe in Democracy and love liberty find it difficult to remain silent at the events in Germany. For not only are the Jews proscribed, but the Catholics are attacked and all men and women, including protestants who seek to think for themselves, who seek to find happiness, and living their own life, in a quiet and orderly manner, are either forced into exile, or molded into an iron form, that permits of no deviation. The things I've tried to stand for, I stand from now more than ever, in the face of this desperate challenge, which is not merely a Jewish question, a catholic question, a protestant question a political question, or a labor question. But one which goes to the very foundation and which we have erected Americans and on which we have stood, moldering our political life, for the preservation of civilization.”

### Appendix C: Alf M. Lando's speech in Fox Movietone Newsreel: *America Condemns Nazi Terrorism*

“All freedom loving people, are shocked and horrified at the inhumanity and intolerance visited upon the Semitic race in the Nazi countries. So, as a freedom loving, humane people, is it small wonder that we protest against blood curdling persecution on another continent, whether it be

Jew or gentile, whether it be catholic priest and nun, or protestant pastor, it would be shocking indeed, if we did not protest.”

*Appendix D: Herbert Hoover’s speech in Universal Newsreel: FDR Leads Nation in Protest against Nazi Persecutions*

“Americans are and should be indignant at the terrible outbreak of Jewish persecution in Germany and the drive against the Christian faiths as well. It represents an outbreak of brutal intolerance which has no parallel in modern history except possibly the destruction of religious worship in Russia by the Bolsheviks.”

*Appendix E: Father Robert I Gannon’s speech in Universal Newsreel: FDR Leads Nation in Protest against Nazi Persecutions*

“People are talking again, about a new, barbarian invasion of Europe. But this time there’s a difference, the original Huns had always been barbarians, but the Nazis, have been born in a civilized father land of glorious Germany rich with spiritual and intellectual traditions, full of splendid universities and fine churches. This fight, makes the recent orgy of frightfulness a thing of very deep significance, for here we see another fall from grace, here again, we see the perfect flower of pride, love of self, (inaudible) even too contempt for god.”

*Appendix F: Bishop Edwin H Hughes’ speech in Universal Newsreel: FDR Leads Nation in Protest against Nazi Persecutions*

“We have every right to expect that there will arise a popular demand in the German Reich not only for the sensation of these brutalities, but also for the punishment of those who have widely turned themselves into legislatures, laws, courts, judges, juries, and have visited the innocent punishment upon the innocent. A plea from the Jew is now a moral plea for ourselves, and humanity cannot afford to be silenced.”

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