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Kristallnacht: A Tragic Disregard for Value of Human Life

In his poignant poem, “Fugue for Kristallnacht”, William Heyen describes the night of November 9, 1938 as he experienced it:

My father came home in the evening I didn't recognize him./ Will they kill me. Around the corner where I lived./ What we would carry. We packed. Who will live who/ will die. Around the corner a beautiful synagogue./ I didn't recognize him. My father. What happened to him./ Was burning. Will they kill me is not so easy./ The little things what we could carry. Was burning./ Around the corner where I lived a beautiful synagogue was burning (Heyen).

This quote provides a muddled, yet haunting real life perspective on the scene of Kristallnacht, a very important step in the development of the Holocaust. Kristallnacht is most often translated as the “Night of Broken Glass” due to the thousands of Jewish homes, synagogues, and businesses that were brutally destroyed in the middle of the night by Nazi directive.

The path to Kristallnacht began when Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany in 1933. With his new position of power, he was free to make radical legal changes designed to cripple the Jewish race and eradicate their existence from his desired empire. In 1935, the Nuremburg Laws were passed which denied Jews basic German citizenship rights. In the next three years, under these laws, anti-Semitism grew at an overwhelming rate among the German people. The Jews were labeled as social outcasts, and it was not long before prejudice conceived of violence.

At the time, the Nazi regime claimed that the violence of Kristallnacht was merely an uncontrolled and unorganized response to the murder of Ernst Vom Rath, the third secretary of

the German embassy in Paris, by Herschel Grynszpan, a young Polish Jew, on November 7, 1938. To continue this illusion, after the death of Rath, Joseph Goebbels, a high ranking German official, announced at a Nazi party meeting in Munich that, “the Fuhrer 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” (“Kristallnacht: A Nationwide Pogrom”). These words essentially gave the Gestapo and the SS all the permission they needed to unleash terrible destruction on Jewish residences and establishments throughout Germany, and the occupied portions of Austria and the Sudetenland. A day after the pogrom, the second in command of the SS, Reinhard Heydrich, recorded “that 815 shops, 29 department stores, and 171 dwellings of Jews had been burned or otherwise destroyed, and that 267 synagogues were set ablaze or completely demolished” (“Kristallnacht (“Night of Broken Glass”)”). Amidst the cruel chaos, around 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, and 91 Jews were murdered. Thus, on the night of Kristallnacht, the state sanctioned subjugation of the Jews moved beyond just legal and social scorn to unchecked brutality.

After the days of November 9 and 10, 1938, the anti-Jewish policies increased to further isolate and oppress the Jews in the German Reich. The indifference with which German citizens responded to Kristallnacht only fueled the Nazi leaders to enforce more radical Jewish persecution. The SS became more and more active in the abuse and slaughter of the Jewish race. The Aryanization laws almost immediately followed, which transferred all Jewish property into German hands, further segregating the Jews from any form of community. Overall, Kristallnacht served to desensitize the Germans to violence and encourage more extreme acts of tyranny in the future, ultimately resulting in the Holocaust.

Now, seventy-five years later, it is important to remember and reflect on the stories of Kristallnacht and the brave people who experienced it such as William Heyen. The best way to gain understanding about those tragic nights is to imagine the savage scene: Small shards of glass shatter to the ground. Broken, yet delicate, the pieces fall in slow motion and without sound onto the streets below. The night sky broods over the scene with dark, unfeeling eyes. More glass, like lost innocence, is destroyed without concern. Everywhere people scream. Those not targeted pretend they cannot hear. The vandals pretend they cannot see their own humanity reflected in the suffering eyes of those whose homes they destroy. They pretend they cannot feel the glass shards and debris crunching under their feet, all that's left of someone's livelihood. Though the men in Nazi uniforms appear to walk away triumphant, all are scarred by the nights of Kristallnacht.

While reading and researching about Kristallnacht, I have been impacted by the outright hatred the Nazis must have felt toward the Jewish people in order to demolish so much of their lives. With the emotional event of Kristallnacht in the background, the slippery slope that culminated in the Holocaust began because the Germans showed that they were prepared to disregard the value of human life. Kristallnacht is just one powerful example of how without fighting for a belief in the worth of human life, humans are doomed to destroy and oppress themselves.

Bibliography

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