
KRISTALLNACHT 1938

As Experienced Then and Understood Now

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MONNA AND OTTO WEINMANN ANNUAL LECTURE
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The Monna and Otto Weinmann Annual Lecture honors Holocaust survivors and their fates, experiences, and accomplishments. Monna Steinbach Weinmann (1906–1991), born in Poland and raised in Austria, fled to England in autumn 1938. Otto Weinmann (1903–1993), born in Vienna and raised in Czechoslovakia; served in the Czechoslovak, French, and British armies; was wounded at Normandy; and received the Croix de Guerre for his valiant contributions during the war. Monna Steinbach and Otto Weinmann married in London in 1941 and emigrated to the United States in 1948.

In November 1938 I was two months short of my eleventh birthday, living in Hanover in north-central Germany. My parents, an older sister, an older brother, and I, together with another Jewish couple with their young son, lived on a floor of a building my parents owned in that city. My father had been fired from his government position after President Hindenburg's death in 1934 and now earned his income advising people who were emigrating about the extremely complicated and frequently changing rules governing the assets they could and could not take with them. Mother was a homemaker. My brother had been so mistreated in school that my parents had sent him to live with a family in Berlin while he attended a Jewish school there. I put up with the beatings in school and was in the first year of a public academic high school after finishing the four years of general school all children attended. My sister also still attended public school.

There had been all sorts of unpleasant incidents earlier, and my parents had already applied for quota numbers to emigrate to the United States, but everything changed drastically as a result of the November 1938 pogrom. As soon as my parents heard about the riots, they had my brother put on a train back to Hanover. He was at home, therefore, while my sister and I were still in school, when the police came to pick up my father. When I came home that day, he was gone; however, the policemen had asked for a man who had lived in another apartment in the building but had died, but did not take the husband of the couple who lived with us. I learned that the synagogue we attended had been burned down—certainly the act that most drastically

affected me and my thinking at the time—and, soon after, that my father's twin brother, who lived in a village in Westphalia, had also been arrested.

From those confused and frightening events of seventy years ago, several events stand out. A few days after November 9, the principal of the school I attended came into the classroom and read aloud a new government decree banning Jewish children from all public schools. Another boy and I got up, collected our things, and left the room and building. This was such a traumatic experience that I blocked it out of my memory until 2001, when two former classmates reminded me of it at an occasion in Hanover. A well-remembered event was a small conference my mother had with the three of us. She told us that all bank accounts of Jews had been frozen; and since she would have to do some grocery shopping before long, she needed to know how much cash each of us had at home and whether we had any unused postage stamps. And then dad came back from the police lockup; I learned later that mother had gone to the official under whom dad had worked before 1934, and that official had gotten the local chief of police to release him. After a few weeks of attending a local Jewish school across the street from the ruined synagogue, I left Germany for England with my brother and sister. In the spring of 1939 my parents were also able to leave for England to await the calling up of our US quota numbers. The couple who had lived with us, and their son who had been my playmate and best friend, were murdered as we learned years later.

In some ways all the events of those November-December days blurred together into one sad ending. The beautiful synagogue was gone; I had been kicked out of school; I had to leave my parents and my best friend; perhaps sensing that things were bad, my greatly loved white mouse died. As the three of us boarded a ship in Hamburg in the evening and woke up the next morning on the North Sea, a segment of life had ended.

A wonderful boarding school in England inspired me, at the ripe age of twelve, to decide to become a teacher; the GI Bill would enable me to attend graduate school for a PhD. My first job, however, was not a teaching but a research position with the War Documentation Project, a U.S. Air Force contract with Columbia University, in 1951–54. That involved working with German documents captured by the Allies and stored for the most part in the old torpedo factory in Alexandria, Virginia; the place is now an artists' boutique but was then the temporary storage site for the American army's World War II records. One day a soldier working there came to my desk, asked

whether he remembered correctly that I had lived in Hanover, and showed me a file on November 1938 in Hanover. In the file was an arrest list that included my father's name. That list made me think about the November pogrom in a somewhat different way. It recalled the fact that the police had asked for someone who had died, but had not picked up the Jewish man who lived with us and had actually opened the door. Obviously, I now realized, they had been supplied with a list made out long before—before the gentleman upstairs had died and the other family had moved in with us. I have no copy of the list and do not know when it was compiled, but the incident has stuck with me as one more indication that in the last months of 1938 new ideas about the treatment of Germany's remaining Jews were being considered.

Much time has passed since then; some new materials have come to light; and several scholars have published important works on the events of the winter of 1938–39. How does it all look now? Two points must be made clear if anyone is to track the developments of those months. First, the very fragmentary evidence that we have points to this fragmentary character being the result of a great deal of informal discussion and consideration of all sorts of possibilities, with only occasional clear decisions being reached, formulated, and put into writing as laws, decrees, formal speeches, and so on. Second, nothing that transpired in the way of discussions and decisions in those months can be understood in isolation. Three closely interrelated issues were being reviewed and decided upon. They are usually regarded and studied in isolation from each other; they cannot in my opinion be understood that way. Certainly the individuals who made the decisions in the Germany of that time examined and discussed them among themselves at the same time, and *they* perceived them as interrelated.

First, those were the months when Hitler regretted having called off war and instead agreed to the Munich Conference, an event others have often called a triumph for Hitler but that he came to consider the worst mistake of his career. Hitler decided that he would not be cheated of war again: he would initiate war against Britain and France, for certain in 1939.¹ As he phrased it in August 1939, his only worry was that at the last moment some *Saukerl*, some SOB, would come forward with a compromise proposal.²

Second, Hitler had hitherto held off those Germans, especially in the fields of medicine and so-called racial science, who had called for the initiation of a systematic program of killing the handicapped. He had explained that such a program would be possible only under the cover of war, something he was more confident was coming

than were those with whom he spoke, for the obvious reason that he intended to start several wars. In the winter of 1938–39 he authorized the first preparatory steps for what came to be called the “euthanasia program”; the first killings appear to have occurred in the summer of 1939; and he signed the formal authorization in late October, back-dating it to September 1.³ I will come back to this intentional misdating in a moment.

Third, the last months of 1938 saw an escalation of anti-Jewish measures, the November pogrom being the most spectacular but not the only manifestation of this. Partly because this was the direction the regime had always wanted to go, partly because of clear signs of pressure for more radical antisemitic steps from within the Nazi Party and sections of the German public, and partly because of the earlier acquiescence in steps against the Jews by a public increasingly enthusiastic about the regime, the winter of 1938–39 was seen by those in charge as a good moment to utilize the bureaucracy to prepare and issue new restrictions on Jews and to release pressures from the public by overt acts against Jewish persons, institutions, and property. Violence escalated during much of 1938, culminating in that of November. Some 30,000 Jews were taken to concentration camps, which from then on had a majority of Jewish inmates. Practically all Jewish houses of worship in the country were destroyed. Thousands of homes and stores were wrecked and looted; hundreds of Jews were killed; a whole series of new and extreme restrictions on Jews were made public.⁴

In this process, the regime learned several important lessons. We forget today that the regime was feeling its way forward; it had some concepts, not always very precise, of whither it wanted to go, but had to experiment with techniques and watch the reaction of the public—always a most important consideration for those who believed in the legend that it was the collapse of the German home front that had caused defeat in World War I. From the November pogrom the government learned that whatever the distaste of the outside world, inside the country there might be some signs of individual disapproval but no concerted criticism. Certainly there was not the slightest reaction from the Christian churches to the wholesale destruction of houses of worship. The open rioting and looting did, however lead to some criticism, and the regime paid attention. As long as all went quietly and according to rules, almost all Germans were prepared to see anything happen to their Jewish neighbors. The obvious question is: what “anything” did the regime want to do?

The evidence we have is fragmentary, but it appears to me to be sufficient to show the direction of the thinking of those in charge. By early January, if not earlier,

Hitler had decided not only that the war against Britain and France would come that year, but also that if the Poles, unlike the Hungarians and Lithuanians, would not subordinate themselves to Germany while she fought the Western powers, as seemed increasingly likely, then Poland would be attacked first or simultaneously.⁵ At the same time, and it would appear as a part of the same thought processes, Hitler and several of his associates moved toward the most radical concepts about both the Jews and the handicapped. On January 21 Hitler mentioned to the visiting foreign minister of Czechoslovakia, “Die Juden würden bei uns vernichtet.” The Jews in our country will be destroyed.⁶ He suggested that all Jews on earth be sent to one place where those who liked them could feed them or they could starve.⁷ Nine days later, in a speech to the German parliament on January 30 he made his notorious public assertion that if there were a new war—on which he had already decided for that year—the Jews of Europe would be killed.⁸

It is worth noting that when in numerous later speeches he referred back to this prophecy, he always attributed it to the erroneous date of September 1, 1939. Even official Nazi Party publications of his speeches would contain the speech of January 30 with and the one of September 1 without that threat, but include the wrong date in the texts of his later speeches. Like the deliberate misdating of the order for the “euthanasia” program, this one provides important insight into the way Hitler and those around him thought about the killing programs and the war: they were parts of the same policy. Just as the beginning of Nazi rule in 1933 had seen the beginnings of massive rearmament, of the persecution of Jews, and of the reordering of the so-called Aryan Germans by the introduction of compulsory sterilization of those the regime imagined might have defective children and, on the other hand, special bonuses for extra children of the “right” sort, so the initiation of war in 1939 would see the initiation of systematic killing.⁹

Perhaps because there had been initiative from within Germany in that direction, as I have already mentioned, and perhaps because, earlier in 1939, there had been considerable preparation for the killing of the handicapped, it was in this area that the Germans began. It was in this that the Germans crossed the major threshold to systematic as distinct from individual killing, and it was in this area that they experimented with implementing techniques. How do you define those who are to be murdered because they fit a category, not because of what they have done or said or might do or believe? How do you collect them from institutions and families? How do

you kill them in vast numbers? How do you dispose of thousands and thousands of corpses? How do you recruit people who will kill others from the time they come to work until lunch break, then all afternoon, and do this six days a week? We see these terrible things in retrospect today and forget that the Nazis were moving into new and uncharted territory, finding their way, experimenting, adjusting, and observing the reaction of the German public.

There is no clear evidence to show whether, in this drastic step to organized, bureaucratically systematized mass murder, the Nazis were consciously developing the techniques they would subsequently apply to the Jews beginning in the summer of 1941. It should, however, surprise no one that, when they did move in that direction, they applied the experiences and to a considerable extent utilized the personnel of the program for killing the handicapped. And it is similarly not surprising that the Roma, Gypsies, would be dealt with very similarly, often being mentioned in the same decrees and orders that referred to Jews.

This is not the time to review those later developments; I want to go back to November 1938. We are too often inclined to allow our knowledge of what actually happened to obscure the way that the actors at the time looked to the future. When in the winter of 1938–39 Hitler was certain that it had been a mistake to draw back from war in 1938, a mistake he intended never to repeat, he expected to win, not lose, the conflicts ahead. These, he had always maintained, would lead to German domination of the globe. The German empire, with the world capital Germania—the renamed Berlin—would last for many centuries.¹⁰ Thereafter, as he and his architect Albert Speer worked it out, that empire would impress itself on subsequent generations by the surviving ruins of massive stone structures the way that the Roman Empire still impressed people, centuries after its fall, by the ruins visible in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Hitler had drafted plans for such buildings long before he was appointed chancellor; in the late 1930s the construction programs were begun. In 1943, contracts for the stones were still being worked on, and detailed city plans were still being drafted in 1945.

To understand a revolution halted in its tracks, we need to pay attention to where the tracks were headed, where those in charge thought they were going. This helps us to understand what was actually done, because those in control made their decisions whenever they felt able to do so in terms of the assumptions they held and the objectives they hoped to attain. It is in this context that we should look back on the

events of November 1938. We can see, especially in the published diary of Joseph Goebbels, how Hitler discussed his plans with Goebbels and others but often kept himself formally in the background. Everything that worked well would in any case be attributed to his brilliant leadership; anything that did not could be blamed on subordinates who had not understood the Führer's true wishes. In the process, the global demographic revolution could be pushed forward and useful experience gathered in an area central to the whole project.

As Germany moved toward war, determined not to draw back, there were still over 300,000 Jews in the country. And whatever territory would come under German control with each of the wars Germany expected to fight and win, all would bring even more Jews with them, as the then recent annexation of Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia had demonstrated. How could this problem be handled by those who seriously believed that it was a problem? We know today that in November 1941 Hitler explained in detail to the Mufti of Jerusalem that after Europe had been emptied of Jews, all Jews living among "non-European peoples," meaning all still on the globe, would be killed.¹¹ We do not know whether Hitler had arrived at this concept in the winter of 1938–39. If he had, there is no evidence that he shared it with anyone. It should, however, not be difficult to understand that, as he looked forward to the territorial expansion that winning wars would bring to Germany, he also gave some thought to the people Germany would acquire as a result.

It is in this context that I believe the measures against Jews in November 1938 should be seen. How best to move? What would the German public stand for? What might the dangers be? How to hold the support of the people while shifting from the pretense that Germany wanted peace to the reality of intending to go to war, an issue that Hitler addressed at great length when he spoke to German newsmen on November 10, 1938?¹² He directed Goebbels and the leaders of the police, Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, to make a major breakthrough on the Jewish issue; let them give it a try.¹³ And then Hermann Göring could harness the stealing of Jewish assets to the armament program that, two years earlier, he had been appointed to direct. Whatever worked could be utilized and developed further; anything that didn't work or sit well with the public would be blamed on underlings and done a bit differently next time.

There is a striking way in which this prefigured what happened in the killing of the handicapped. As that first of the systematic killing programs moved forward massively, there was trouble. Relatives complained; a few brave church leaders spoke

out; there were riots in some places when buses came to hospitals and old folks' homes to take people away to be murdered. In the summer of 1941, as casualties on the Eastern Front mounted, public concern, especially over the entirely justified fear that seriously wounded German soldiers would be killed by their own government, was not thought good for the morale of people at home and soldiers at the Front. So the killing procedure was changed from a centralized to a decentralized one that continued until the end of the war—with some trying to keep it going thereafter. Please note: the image for the German public was changed, but the direction of policy remained fixed. The tens of thousands killed after August 1941 were as dead as those murdered earlier in the killing facilities created for and utilized in the prior stage of the program. And, of course, those who had worked at these facilities were available for the next systematic killing program.

When the procedure for the murder of the handicapped was changed, the killing of Jews in the newly occupied parts of the Soviet Union was already under way and was being extended to all other areas under German control. In this terrible process the Germans also ran into some practical problems. There were no difficulties with either the German public or the military. But the direct personal killing by shooting was breaking the nerves of too many of the killers, and the administrative apparatus of mass murder was simply not large enough. The first difficulty was to be resolved by the construction of special killing centers, of which the first were being designed in the fall of 1941. The second problem was the cause of the notorious Wannsee Conference of January 1942 in which most German administrative agencies were drawn into a major portion of the murder program as participants.

The point that I want to make is that these awful events on which we look back today should be seen in the way all historical events move, namely forward. In this way of looking at the events of November 1938 we may be able to see them as a radical new stage in a process in which the German authorities felt their way forward without a clear sense of just how to go about realizing their goals. It was one thing to work on plans for airplanes: a one-engine dive-bomber for use against France, a two-engine dive-bomber for use against England, a six- or eight-engine bomber for use against the United States.¹⁴ Similarly, Hitler and his architects could work on designs for German cities and new settlements. However grandiose, preposterous, or technically impossible with the resources of that era, such projects grew out of well-established prior concepts, weapons, and street plans. But how do you go about removing a population element

that is considered simultaneously inferior and threatening? And how do you go about this when you can be certain that the victorious wars, of which you are about to start the first one, are guaranteed to bring you even more? Whenever confronted with such puzzles, the leaders of Germany chose to try radical solutions, or at least they made a major effort to develop them.

In the concentration camps and killing centers from 1942 on, they conducted terrible medical experiments to find means of mass, as distinct from individual surgical, sterilization. For whom would such procedures, had they been found, be intended? In a world in which the handicapped, the Jews, and the Gypsies had been killed, the obvious victims were the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe, whose labor would be utilized until they could be replaced by German settlers. The experiments never succeeded; my point is that here was the obvious answer to the puzzle of who would do the needed work on farms, factories, and in mines in the East until the planned multiple marriages of surviving German soldiers, preferably with lots of multiple births resulting from other medical experiments, made a replacement of the Slavic by a German population feasible.

In this nightmare world, we can discern the outlines of an earth remade according to the concepts of race and space, with a supposedly superior race inheriting the globe's space. Those striving toward that world had some fixed and some vague ideas of how to get there and what it would be like. There was no doubt that wars would be necessary, and long before coming to power Hitler had promised to lead the German people "whither they must shed their blood" as he phrased it.¹⁵ There was no doubt that more of the "right" kind of Germans would be needed to populate that world. There was no doubt that the non-Aryans would have to disappear; people could not be Germanized as Hitler repeatedly explained. But the details of how to reach the goal were unclear, in large part because it was unprecedented.

The vast expansion of European control over portions of the globe in the preceding century had certainly often been accompanied by mass slaughter; but as Hitler and his associates knew, most of the British lived in Great Britain, most of the French lived in France, most of the Dutch lived in the Netherlands, and so on. They might or might not teach their language to people they called "the natives," or try to convert the local population to their religion, and a few would live as administrators, businessmen, soldiers, or missionaries in the colonies; but the whole concept of nineteenth-century colonialism was rejected by the Nazis.

The world that the Nazis envisioned was fundamentally different. Recent scholarship has at times suggested that some earlier colonial practices, such as the German slaughter of the Herrero and Nama peoples in German Southwest Africa, prefigured the extermination policies of the Nazis. Whatever similarities, and individual or conceptual continuities might be noted, the reality remains that these are connections and similarities noted and analyzed by outsiders decades later.¹⁶ There is no evidence that anyone in Germany at the time of the Third Reich looked to these earlier events as precedents or as experiences from which they might learn. They thought of themselves as pioneers moving across novel thresholds into unknown territory; and in a real, but horrendous, way, they were. It is in this wider context of the Nazi leadership casting about, trying new approaches, pushing the limits of the politically feasible, that I now view the terrible events of November 1938. After a political assassination in 1936, when a Jew killed the head of the Nazi Party in Switzerland, all German government and Nazi Party agencies were directed not to create any incidents.¹⁷ In 1938 the killing of a low-level diplomat in what was essentially a private quarrel was utilized at Hitler's direction as the excuse for a massive pogrom.

Many members of my family, primarily on my father's side, were murdered in the Holocaust, but much of my immediate family was spared the worst. In spite of the bad things that happened to us, we were most fortunate when so many suffered far more. But it did give me a start when I was taken on a tour of the Holocaust Museum Houston and we passed a screen on which a series of slides of Crystal Night was being projected. As I looked, there was a picture of our synagogue in Hanover, engulfed in flames. It brought back vivid memories of going to services there; it also reemphasized to me what has long appeared to me to have been the essence of National Socialist ideology. The German word for a house of worship—of whatever religion—is *Gotteshaus*, a house of God. If one wishes to remove from the world the Jewish concept of divinity, a concept taken over by the Christians who made up over 99% of the German population, then you have to start somewhere. Starting with God's houses and those who worship God there may not be such a strange place to start. In 1978 three German scholars engaged in serious work on Nazi Germany published a book entitled *Hitler's Cities: The Politics of Construction in the Third Reich*. One of the interesting and important findings of these scholars was that in all the plans for the recasting and rebuilding of German cities after the war, as well as for the development of new cities, villages, and residential areas inside the old Germany and in the

territories conquered in the war, there was to be no space allocated for churches.¹⁸ Those who burned down God's houses would alone inhabit the earth and worship only themselves.

NOTES

1. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy 1933–1939: The Road to World War II* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005), chap. 26.
2. Hitler on 22 Aug. 1939: "Ich habe nur eine Sorge, daß mir Chamberlain oder irgend so ein anderer Saukerl im letzten Augenblick mit Vorschlägen oder Umfällen kommt. Er fliegt die Treppe herunter." *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945*, Series D, vol. 7, 172.
3. Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
4. Hans-Jürgen Döscher, *Reichskristallnacht: Die November-Pogrome 1938* (Frankfurt/M: Ullstein, 1988), remains the best account.
5. Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy*, chaps. 27–28.
6. *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik*, Series D, vol. 6, 170.
7. *Ibid.*, 171.
8. Max Domarus, ed. *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945* (Neustadt a.d. Aich: Verlagsdruckerei Schmidt, 1963), 2:1058.
9. Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide*.
10. The best account remains Jochen Thies, *Architekt der Weltherrschaft: Die "Endziele" Hitlers* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1976).
11. *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik*, Series D, vol. 8, part 2, no. 515.
12. Wilhelm Treue, ed. "Rede Hitlers vor der deutschen Presse (10. November 1938)," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 6 (1958): 175–91.
13. Angela Hermann, "Hitler und sein Stoßtrupp in der 'Reichskristallnacht,'" *ibid.*, 58 (2008): 603–20.
14. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 1.
15. Hitler on May 23, 1928, translated in Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy*, 40.

16. The eagerness of the German military to implement genocidal policies can be understood as a development growing out of prior tendencies excellently described and analyzed in Isabel V. Hull's book, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

17. *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik*, Series C, vol. 4, part 2, no. 540, n. 4.

18. Jost Dülffer, Jochen Thies, and Josef Henke, *Hitlers Städte: Baupolitik im Dritten Reich* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1978), passim, esp. 20.

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Professor Weinberg was born in Hanover, Germany. Following *Kristallnacht* (the November pogrom) in 1938, he and his family emigrated to Britain and then to the United States. Professor Weinberg is the author of the two-volume study *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany* (1970, 1980, 1994); *Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (1995); *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (1994 and 2005); and *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (2005). He is the editor of *Hitler's Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf* (1961 and 2003), as well as a primary consultant for the publication *World War II Chronicle* (2007).

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In furtherance of this program the Center has established a series of working and occasional papers prepared by scholars in history, political science, philosophy, religion, sociology, literature, psychology, and other disciplines. Selected from Center-sponsored lectures and conferences, or the result of other activities related to the Center's mission, these publications are designed to make this research available in a timely fashion to other researchers and to the general public.