

A contemporary account of the German pogroms of November 1938

Elizabeth Zimmerman
7 January 2014

Shortly after the November 1938 pogroms, journalist and historian Konrad Heiden wrote a work entitled *Night Oath*, in which he gave a detailed account of the horrific events marking the transition from social discrimination to the systematic brutalization and persecution of Jews in Germany.

Heiden's study is based on numerous eyewitness reports collected by the Jewish Central Information Office and the exiled Social Democratic Party, foreign press articles, and an analysis of the Nazi press. It appeared in early 1939 under the title of *The New Inquisition* in English, *Tyskland i fara* in Swedish and *Les vèpres hitlériennes* in French. A Dutch edition was planned, but it was eventually banned by the Dutch prime minister, in order to avoid harming Holland's relations with Nazi Germany.

For the first time since the events 75 years ago, the Wallenstein Verlag has now published a German edition of this insightful and readable book under the title of *A Night in November 1938: A contemporary report*. It has been carefully edited by Markus Roth, Sascha Feuchert and Christiane Weber, who have also provided the text with an extensive commentary. The 190-page book also includes a review of the life of Konrad Heiden (1901-1966) by Markus Roth, who is working on a biography of the author.

Konrad Heiden was already living in exile in Paris in 1938. He had been closely observing the rise of National Socialism since its beginnings in Munich in the 1920s, detailing it in several books. His two-volume biography of Hitler was published by Europa Verlag in Zurich in 1936 and 1937. A Wikipedia article notes, "Among the many biographies of Hitler today, there is hardly one that is not based on the authentic descriptions found in this work, although the author himself is largely forgotten".

The opening pages of *A Night in November 1938* depict the eerie scene of fifty thousand young men, swearing an oath of allegiance to the Führer as part of their ceremonial admittance into the SS (Hitler's elite force), and going on to commit systematic atrocities against the Jewish population on the same night of November 9, 1938.

"Today you are entering the organisation that silently presides over Germany. Today you become members of the mystical, fearful, all-powerful SS. The SS doesn't indulge in

the rip-roaring celebrations. It doesn't sing and exult on the great anniversaries of the movement. It observes silently and coldly, hardly noticed. But those on whom its snake eyes fall disappear noiselessly from view, from the world, perhaps even from life. The SS doesn't begrudge the people their revels or the SA (paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party) their parades; they themselves rule in silence. Many do not love us, but all will fear us", said SS commander Heinrich Himmler.

On the following pages Heiden describes how the Nazis exploited the Paris assassination of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath by the 17-year-old Herschel Grynszpan as an excuse for their anti-Semitic provocations and the coming atrocities of November 9. He chronicles in a few paragraphs how the discrimination against the Jewish population had intensified since the Nazis' seizure of power. In doing so, he reminds readers of the close connection between social progress in Germany and the emancipation of the Jews:

"After a hundred and fifty years of lethargy, the spiritual and political renewal of Germany begins towards the end of the eighteenth century at the same time as the emancipation of the German Jews. The discovery that all human beings are 'equal' endowed all peoples with enormous power in that era; the Jews were among those newly empowered. They constituted a new ferment in German society, aiding its advancement. It cannot be denied that anti-Semitism found such a movement and its consequences damaging; that is a matter of opinion. But the fact is that the historical rise of Germany in the nineteenth century cannot be separated from the historical rise of German Jewry. The integration of Germany into the process of Western European economic development since the 1850s was to a considerable extent the work of its Jews. The Jewish contribution to the natural sciences, from Hertz to Einstein, cannot be seriously disputed. But it was not only in the practical arts that they made significant achievements. Members of the Jewish circle around Rahel Levin-Varnhagen were the first to establish the unconstrained veneration of Goethe in Germany. After Goethe's death, the last poet to secure Germany's place in world literature was (Heinrich) Heine, a Jew."

Under the heading "The Night of the Axes", Heiden cites numerous eyewitness accounts of the destruction of homes and

shops and abuse of Jews on the night of November 9. He omits names and precise details of location to avoid endangering the victims and their families.

He describes the fate of a man in a “southern German town”, who had suffered a nervous breakdown and lay in bed, while his wife begged intruders for mercy: “It is typical of Nazis that they regard a person’s illness as something simulated. Mr. X. was dragged from his bed and thrown through the splintered fragments of the shattered front door, suffering lacerations all over his body. He then went barefoot and covered in blood to a police station, where officers saw to it that he was transferred to hospital.”

Heiden proves once again that the fires and other destructive acts of *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) took place in line with precise plans, and that the SS and SA had received specific instructions to destroy Jewish shops and break into Jewish-owned homes and buildings, where everything was smashed to bits or looted.

Synagogues were set on fire according to plan, firebombs and petrol having been procured and exploited by the Nazis. The fire department throughout the country was instructed not to fight fires in the synagogues, but merely to prevent them spreading to neighbouring buildings. However, the Nazis concealed their role in the crimes in an attempt to have them seen as the spontaneous expression of the people’s wrath, allegedly incited by the death of the diplomat, vom Rath.

Heiden refutes this on the basis of numerous reports collected in his book. Thus he writes: “One of our informants reports as follows: ‘An SA member known to me personally told me that the command for this pogrom was given a fortnight in advance, long before the murder of vom Rath. On the Wednesday in question, the orders were issued at seven o’clock and the young boys were then allowed access to alcohol.’ Whatever the case, the plan for the pogrom had undoubtedly existed for quite some time; the shot in Paris may have accelerated its implementation...”

Mass arrests began on November 10, 1938, in the course of which thousands of Jews were taken from their homes and transported to the concentration camps at Dachau near Munich, Sachsenhausen or Oranienburg near Berlin and Buchenwald near Weimar. The treatment of the detainees in the concentration camps was harrowing. They were beaten, humiliated and forced to spend hours standing and exercising, which most of the weak and the sick did not survive.

Under the heading “Threatened with Starvation”, Heiden describes how the Nazis invoked further laws and decrees in order to deprive the Jewish population of any possibility of earning a living.

“In short, Jews can no longer run their own business. On November 10, the enraged population spontaneously smashed up his stores and carried away his goods. He then has to set up store again and buy new goods. After he feels he has satisfactorily done this, perhaps with the last of his funds, the

commissioner for the Four Year Plan (Hermann Göring) expropriates his ruined, restored and replenished shop. And he does so coldly, abiding strictly to the law and suppressing any feelings of spontaneous outrage in order to finally achieve ‘the exclusion of Jews from German commercial life.’”

At the end of his study, Heiden evaluates the “deeper significance of the excesses of November 9 and 10” as follows: “Anti-Semitism was hitherto the strongest force driving National Socialism. After five years of National Socialist rule, however, it turned out that anti-Semitism had not yet sufficiently penetrated the mindset of the German people. This deficiency was to be remedied by an extremely provocative event. The shards and debris of Jewish property, the battered and terrified images of the Jewish population were to act on the imagination of the masses more persuasively than speeches, newspaper articles or laws. The masses were to be whipped into violence by the stimulation of incendiary explosions; they were to be driven to frenzy by the sight of the devastation, and possibly emboldened to enrich themselves on the spoils; the fires of the burning synagogues would inflame their tempers. The masses were to be absorbed into the turmoil of the anti-Semitic event in order to nurture anti-Semitic sentiments”.

According to Heiden, this was “not achieved and a plethora of eyewitnesses corroborate his view. Apart from local exceptions, the broad masses of the German people did not participate in the crimes of November 9 to 19: they at least partially repudiated them”.

Heiden also quotes statements from different parts of Germany. An observer from Aachen says: “The mood of the population is passive, but it is nauseated by these events”.

Heiden also points out that the pogroms against the Jewish population were closely related to the crisis that then plagued the fascist regime and led to the outbreak of World War II shortly thereafter.

A Night in November 1938 is an insightful study of the November pogroms and well worth reading. In face of world capitalism’s deepest crisis since the 1930s, knowledge of these events is not only of historical value; it is also a warning about the lengths to which the capitalist system in its death agony is prepared to go, if it is not overturned in time by the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)