

The November pogroms of 1938 and the genocide in Gaza

Peter Schwarz
10 November 2023

Eighty-five years after the November pogroms (also referred to as Kristallnacht), pogrom-like sentiments are once again being stirred up in Germany. The only difference is that they are not ostensibly directed against Jews, but against Muslims and all those who oppose the genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. But no one should be deceived: wherever xenophobia thrives, antisemitism is not far away.

The night of November 9, 1938 marked a turning point in the persecution of Jews by the Nazi regime. “A good many Jews had been murdered and tortured and robbed before, but these crimes, except for those which took place in the concentration camps, had been committed mostly by brown-shirted rowdies acting out of their own sadism and greed while the State authorities looked on, or looked the other way. Now the German government itself had organized and carried out a vast pogrom,” William L. Shirer wrote in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.

The Nazi regime used the assassination of the German diplomat Ernst von Rath two days earlier in Paris by 17-year-old Herschel Grynszpan as the pretext for a pogrom organised at the highest level. Over 1,400 synagogues were burnt down, thousands of Jewish businesses destroyed, homes looted, people attacked and cemeteries desecrated. Around 30,000 Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps and around 1,500 murdered.

The perpetrators went unpunished, while the Jews were collectively fined one billion marks. Insurance payments for destroyed businesses and homes were collected by the state. Those who managed to leave the country legally had to sell their property for far less than it was worth and hand over almost all their assets to the state. The pogrom of 9 November set the course for the state-organised murder of six million Jews, which began one year later.

Today, this crime against humanity is being cited by German politicians and the media to justify another war crime: the extermination and expulsion of the Palestinians in Gaza. Anyone who criticises this genocide is denounced as an antisemite. This goes hand in hand with a ferocious and

hateful agitation against migrants and refugees. All of the parties in the German parliament have adopted the policies of the far-right Alternative for Germany, AfD.

In a video address already dealt with on the WSWS, Green Party Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck threatened that “Muslims living here” would lose their “right to protection from right-wing extremist violence” if they did not “clearly distance themselves from anti-Semitism” – an open invitation for neo-Nazis to terrorise migrants.

Writing on Habeck’s statement in *Der Spiegel* magazine Thomas Fischer, a former presiding judge at the Federal Court of Justice, commented, “The minister’s approach to the rhetorical ... forfeit of claims to protection and tolerance amounts to a commonplace variant of rehashed racism.”

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stirs up the pogrom atmosphere with the slogan, spread out on the front page of *Der Spiegel*: “We must finally deport people on a grand scale.”

The Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder is calling for “a fundamental debate about integration and parallel societies.” “Anti-Semitic” – i.e. pro-Palestinian – rallies should be “banned and participation made a criminal offence”. People with dual citizenship are to have their German passports revoked and migrants subjected to a test of allegiance.

For weeks, the tabloid *Bild* has been defaming all critics of the right-wing Netanyahu government’s brutal policies as “Jew-haters” and campaigning for repression and deportation. This type of incitement is not only found in the tabloid, however, but across the media spectrum.

When it comes to asylum policy, every party – from the newly-formed Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance to the AfD – is engaged in a perfidious competition to outdo one another. No measure is too vile, too inhumane and too brutal to prevent migrants seeking protection from entering Germany.

The leader of the Green Party, Ricarda Lang, and the Green Minister President of Baden-Württemberg, Winfried Kretschmann, have called for a tougher refugee policy in a joint article for the *Tagesspiegel*. Numbers should be

reduced and asylum procedures accelerated. There must be “clearer consequences” for all those “who are not fleeing war and persecution.”

On Tuesday night, the federal and state governments agreed to tighten up the country’s asylum policy. The federal states and local authorities plan to save around one billion euros by cutting benefits that already barely provide minimum subsistence. Instead of cash, asylum seekers are to receive payment cards or vouchers. In addition, the outsourcing of asylum procedures to other countries like Nigeria is being examined. But for many, such as the chairman of the Christian Democrats (CD) Friedrich Merz, even these measures are insufficient.

Antisemitism and Islamophobia

The fact that the genocide in Gaza and the current campaign against refugees in Germany are being justified on the basis of the worst crimes against humanity committed by German imperialism is the height of cynicism – and is based on a falsification of history.

The development of modern antisemitism into a mass movement at the end of the 19th century in France, Russia, Austria and later also in Germany was inextricably linked to the rise of the working class. Antisemitism served to unite desperate middle class layers in the name of the “nation” and to use them as a battering ram against the socialist labour movement. Today the hate campaign against refugees and Islamophobia fulfill the same purpose.

Over a period of twenty years, the Dreyfus Affair in France served to stir up the most reactionary political elements against the socialist movement. In Vienna, Mayor Karl Lueger, the role model of Hitler, used antisemitism for the same purpose, while in Russia the Tsarist regime reacted to the revolutionary movement of the workers with horrific antisemitic pogroms.

Hitler took this development to its most extreme form during the deepest crisis of German and world imperialism. “The national ‘renaissance’ leaned wholly upon the middle classes, the most backward part of the nation, the heavy ballast of history,” writes Leon Trotsky in his masterful *What is National Socialism*. “Political art consisted in fusing the petty bourgeoisie into oneness through its common hostility to the proletariat. What must be done in order to improve things? First of all, throttle those who are underneath. Impotent before big capital, the petty bourgeoisie hopes in the future to regain its social dignity through the ruin of the workers.”

The fate of the Jews was inextricably linked to the overthrow of capitalism, the overcoming of the nation state and the construction of a socialist society by the working class. The defeat of the German labour movement in 1933, a result of the disastrous policies of the social democratic and Stalinist leaders, also sealed their fate.

If political parties and the media are once again fuelling pogrom-type sentiments today, they are doing so for the same reasons. Their ruthless policy of war, wage reductions and social cuts cannot be reconciled with democratic methods, but require instead the mobilisation of the dregs of society. If not stopped, pogroms whipped up by official political circles will once again also be directed against Jews. This is demonstrated by the trivialisation of Nazi crimes at the highest level in Germany and the state’s cooperation with the heirs of Nazi collaborators and antisemites in Ukraine.

In their support for Israeli war crimes, Germany and the US are not at all concerned with protecting Jewish lives. Rather, they are opening up a new front in a developing Third World War, with which they seek to assert their hegemony as world powers against China, Russia and other countries. They have devastated large parts of the region in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria without achieving their aims. Now, confronted with a standstill in their war against Russia in Ukraine, they are preparing another war against Iran.

The struggle against racist incitement and antisemitism is inseparably linked to the struggle against this insane war policy. Just as Israeli and Palestinian workers must unite against genocide, workers in Germany can only defend their vital interests if they defend the rights of migrants.

The sole lesson to be learnt from the November pogroms is the necessity to reject all forms of nationalism and racist agitation and to build an international socialist movement.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact