

The November Pogrom, the Holocaust and Genocide  
A Contemporary View

Yehuda Bauer



We are meeting here, as we all know, exactly seventy years after the pogrom of November 9/10, 1938, which the Nazis called the Night of Crystal, or Reichskristallnacht. In this lecture, I would like to discuss some of the contexts in which the November Pogrom has to be seen: that of the Holocaust, Shoah, the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its allies; that of World War II; and that of contemporary genocides. My aim is to point out some of the features of all these that make them a topical issue for all of us.

Without World War II it is unlikely that there would have been a genocide of the Jews, and the war developments were decisive in the unfolding of the tragedy. It is increasingly recognized today that one has to understand the military, political, economic, social, and ideological elements as they developed during the period. For most of us today the core, so to speak, of the War, its center in the sense of its overall cultural and civilizational impact, were the Nazi crimes, and first and foremost among these stands the Shoah. This, to me, seems to be the view shared by most people in the West today, but this was not the view either of the Allies during the war, or of the political world in the West until some time in the sixties.

The November Pogrom was not pre-planned. No one could have predicted that a young Jewish man in Paris, whose family in Germany had been harshly mistreated and deported to a godforsaken Polish township on the German-Polish border would commit an act of desperation and try and murder the German ambassador in France. Herschel Gruenspan did not kill the ambassador, but an official in the embassy, who by the way was no Nazi, named Ernst vom Rath, on November 7, 1938. Vom Rath died two days

later, and Hitler gave Goebbels his approval to start a major pogrom against Jews, their property, their persons, and their synagogues.

What was the context? The pogrom occurred several weeks after the Munich agreement, which dismantled Czechoslovakia and handed it over to Nazi Germany. The Munich agreement was viewed, for many years, as a great Nazi achievement, and as a result of British appeasement of Germany. Recent historical research has, in my view, corrected that analysis. Hitler viewed Munich as an infuriating disappointment. He had wanted a war, and he did not get it. He wanted to conquer Czechoslovakia militarily, and thus prepare Germany for further conquests to the East. Munich, in fact, was a British victory, designed to achieve several aims. A very basic one was to try and avoid any military confrontation with Germany, because the British armed forces were totally unprepared for it: in the summer of 1938, the British Army had a total of six infantry divisions ready for employment. Two of these were stationed in Palestine, to deal with the Arab rebellion there, two were stationed at home, and two took care of all the rest of the British Empire. The fleet was impressive, but fleets cannot fight land armies. The Air Force was a bad joke. The other aim was to divert rising German power towards the East, thus rectifying the obvious injustices of the Versailles Treaty. But the whole project of preparing the war must be seen in its Nazi ideological context: there was, as I shall try to prove, no economic or political need for Germany to start a war, but Nazi Germany had been planning on just that since 1933. Soon after the conquest of power, Hitler spoke to Army generals and told them that he would put an absolute priority on rearmament, so that the Army should be ready for war – and this is precisely what happened. German economy became geared to rearmament. Why was this policy pursued? I think that the answer lies in a document which was part of the Nuremberg trial documentation, namely the memorandum that Hitler wrote to Goering in August 1936, in advance of the latter's nomination to be the responsible person for the Four Year Plan in October, 1936. The memorandum, written in terrible German, deals with the acquisition and development of raw materials and other prerequisites of the rearmament program. The preamble explains why there is a need for this: "Since the beginning of the French Revolution the world has been drifting with increasing speed towards a new conflict, whose most extreme solution is named Bolshevism, but whose content and aim is only the removal of those strata of

society which gave the leadership to humanity up to the present, and their replacement by international Jewry...a victory of Bolshevism over Germany would ..lead...to the final destruction, even the extermination of the German people”. Therefore Germany must be prepared for a war within four years.

This was no idle talk. Germany’s economy and social development was now geared to a preparation for war which had the clear aim of fighting what the Nazi leadership termed “international Jewry.” The figure of the Jew was the Satan that was endangering the German people. But in 1938 there were still Jews in Germany and Austria, and one could not fight the external Satan and leave his local representatives in the Reich. The Reich had to be purified. The Jews had to be driven out. And the opportunity to approach that goal seemed to come with the murder of vom Rath. The purpose of the Pogrom was not to kill the Jews. That would develop later. The purpose was to get rid of them. The 26.000 male Jews who were arrested were almost all of them freed when their frantic relatives managed to get visas or ways to reach other countries even without visas. They had to leave Germany within six weeks. The November pogrom was not part of the so-called Final Solution, but it was one of the stages towards its development. It was, in fact, part of the preparation for the future war. It cannot be said to have failed, although the response of the population was not enthusiastic; Jewish emigration became a panicky flight. It would have achieved its aim if only the Jews could have found havens to flee to. But the world was closed to Jews.

We rarely ask the question – why did World War II break out; not how, but why? Usually, we deal with how it happened, what preparations were made, who did what and when. It is clear that Nazi Germany initiated the conflict, and few are naïve enough to argue that Germany attacked Poland because of Danzig, or because of the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles. But then, why did the German leadership want the war? All we know points to the fact that the German population did not want a war, just 20 years after the horrors of World War I. The captains of big industry did not want a war either. The military leadership, under Ludwig Beck, the Chief of Staff, actually prepared a putsch against Hitler if only the British stood up to him, because they feared a war against overwhelming odds, though they did want to recoup the losses imposed on Germany by the Versailles treaty. The weight of the documentation seems to me to indicate that the

drive was purely ideological. The Nazi movement came to power committed to expansion and conquest, based on a racist ideology. It saw war as the natural state of a healthy human society. It thus rebelled against the legacy of an Enlightenment of which it itself was, if one may use that term, an illegitimate offspring. But for the ordinary German citizen, the first priority was to get out of the terrible economic conditions that prevailed in Germany. In this, the Nazis succeeded. Germany's economic recovery was the result, first of all, of the upswing from the depth of the depression, an upswing that had started before the Nazi accession to power; second, it was the result of massive bribes of the German masses through a rise in pensions and some less important but effective social engineering, paid for by deficit financing. They all but abolished unemployment. They could have raised real wages, but did not do so, in order to pay for rearmament. Rearmament brought them to the brink of financial collapse, despite the overall improvement of the economy, and they got out of that when things became really bad, in 1937/8, by robbing Jewish property, as Goetz Aly has shown in his book 'Hitlers Volksstaat', a process that was finalized as a result of the November Pogrom. Faced with great economic obstacles which were the result of the imperatives of their expansionist ideology, their way out was an increasing radicalization, and a race forward into war and conquest. They did not occupy other countries in order to avoid an economic collapse, but they managed to continue to be afloat economically by exploiting the conquered countries as well as their allies mercilessly, and in fact paying for the war by robbing them clean of all possible assets. The first target of this policy were the Jews. However, robbing the Jews was not the reason for the Holocaust. The annihilation of the Jews had been an implicit, not an explicit, part of the National Socialist ideology from the very beginning. Words and thoughts became actions. They robbed the Jews first, and then killed **them**, and not all bespectacled men and all women with red hair, because of antisemitism, which was a central element in the Weltanschauung that spurred the regime forward.

The other main part of Nazi ideology was expansion. Why were they committed to expansion? Did German economic and social recovery depend on conquest? Hardly. By 1936-8, the economy was on its way out of the crisis, social stability had been partly achieved, and it was rearmament and war preparations that caused a financial crisis of

1937/8. Germany did not need a war to maintain a solid growth. It did not need to occupy Eastern Europe to get grain or raw materials, as it produced manufactured goods that could easily and profitably be exchanged for the things it needed. It certainly did not need any land. Germany today, a smaller country than in 1937, with a larger population, not only does not need to export any superfluous people, but needs constant immigration to maintain its standard of living. The hunger for land was an ideological postulate, the expansion a chimera, the war materially useless. I repeat: from a rational German perspective, a pointless war, a war produced by ideology, not by pragmatic needs.

Antisemitism was a central component of the ideology that produced that war, with its 35 million or more victims in Europe, resulting in the destruction of much of the continent. How central was it? I think that it was very central indeed. It was fed by the quasi-religious character of National Socialism, which promised redemption and a Thousand-Year Reich that would be brought about by the Messiah, the Jesus-figure, who had become flesh and blood – Adolf Hitler. The struggle for ever-lasting happiness would be conducted against Satan and his minions, and Satan was the stereotypical Jew. This was easily understood by the German masses, as it derived from Christian antisemitism, which had never been genocidal, but which had formed the source of the Nazi variety. The way I read it, the desire to force the emigration of Jews from Germany in the thirties, to Poland in late 1939, to Madagascar in 1940, and the Soviet Arctic in early 1941, and then the genocide itself, were all part of the wish to exorcise the devil from the midst of the Chosen People, namely the Nordic peoples of the Aryan race. The methods, the timing, the stages and zigzags in which these policies developed, were determined by pragmatic considerations. The aim, however, was entirely non-pragmatic, and as I said, purely ideological. Thus, later, the existence of ghettos, for instance in Bialystok and Lodz, was very important for the German war machine, and was supported by local Nazi officials. Contrary to all modern capitalistic logic of cost-effectiveness, the ghettos were annihilated by orders from the Berlin center, in pursuance of ideological aims. Examples of this kind are legion.

This non-pragmatic character of the genocide of the Jews is one of the elements that differentiate it from all other genocides. Other elements were the totality, that is the desire to annihilate every single Jew defined as such by the Nazis (obviously, no Satan

could be left to stay around if the Nazi Chosen People project was to succeed); the universality, namely the idea, developed in stages, that Jews everywhere should be treated the same way they were being treated in Nazi Europe; and the fact that new methods and new uses for modern technological means to murder millions were produced within a civilized, cultured, society in the center of Europe to do so. Interestingly, the gassing and burning of Jews was not only pragmatically more efficient than killing them into ditches by fire-arms, as was done in the occupied Soviet areas, but was symbolically parallel to the exorcism practiced by the auto-da-fes in the Iberian peninsula hundreds of years before that. In both cases, personifications of Satan were exorcised by fire. Antisemitism, and the desire to conquer and rule, not only Europe, but ultimately, with allies, the whole world, were the two mutually complementary pillars of the Nazi project. Complementary, because the Nazi Good could only triumph if the Jewish Satan was defeated and annihilated. Thus, antisemitism was one of the main causes for a war that caused the death of uncounted **non-Jewish** victims of World War II and the devastation of large parts of Europe.

It is clear to all, I think, that the Shoah was a genocide, and as such it not only can, but must be compared with other genocides. Only then can we say whether it was different, and to what extent. The Shoah was not unique. For most people, I think, uniqueness means a one-time thing. If that is what the Shoah was, then it would never happen again, to anyone; it then would become irrelevant for the present and the future, and if that is so we can safely relegate it to yearly liturgical observances, memorials, and the spouting of worn-out clichés, as many politicians love to do. More than that: every historical event is unique, every people and their fate are unique. If the Holocaust was unique in that sense, then it was just like any other event in human history, no different from the uniqueness of the British Empire, the Napoleonic wars, or the fate of India under the Moghuls: paradoxically, then, the Shoah would then be like any other historic occurrence, it would be flattened, bagatellized – nothing special. Uniqueness turns into its opposite, total trivialization. But yes, the Shoah was unprecedented; a genocide like that had never happened before. But it can, and to a certain extent already has, become a precedent. It can happen again, to Jews or to others, perpetrated by anyone against

anyone; not in exactly the same way, to be sure, but in parallel and approximately similar ways.

The Holocaust had, as I said, several contexts – the context of antisemitism, which was its main cause; the contexts of Jewish history, of European and World history, of racism and of genocide. In World War II, Nazi Germany wanted to destroy liberalism, democracy, pacifism, socialism, conservatism, Christianity – all those things that we inaccurately call Western civilization. Germany's war was to clear the way for the conquest of Europe as a whole, and then, with allies, of the whole world. A new system of values was to be imposed on humanity, a racist hierarchy, with the Nordic peoples of the Aryan race on top, and everyone else in a hierarchical order under them. No Jews, because all Jews would by then be annihilated. This racist world was a completely new utopia. Mankind has experienced uncounted attempts to substitute one religion for another, destroy one nation or empire by another, or one social class by another. In the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie displaced the aristocracy; so that the original idea of communism, before it became the ideology of the Soviet imperialist regime, namely the attempt to replace the bourgeoisie by the working class, was not really new. But Nazism was new; the establishment of a racial hierarchy was utterly novel – although we know today that races do not exist, because we all come originally from East Africa, as DNA research has shown. Nazism was therefore a truly revolutionary attempt, possibly the only really revolutionary attempt in the last two hundred years. This revolutionary attempt was directed against Western civilization. The Jews were the symbol of that civilization, because of the moral teachings it had produced. After all, one of the main cultural bases for modern Western civilization was the Bible, and for Christians it had two parts: the Old and the New Testament, and both were written largely by Jews. There was inherent logic in the Nazi ideology: if you want to destroy the Western tradition, you start with the annihilation of one of its founders, namely the Jews.

Where, within that context, does the concept of genocide come in? We have, of course, the very problematic definition of genocide in the 1948 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was ratified by most of the governments of the world. The definition, as you all know, talks of an intent to eliminate an ethnic, national, racial, or religious group as such, in part or in whole, and lists five

ways in which the perpetrators do it: killing members of the group; causing serious physical or mental harm to the group; creating conditions of life that prevent the group's existence; preventing births of members of the targeted group; and kidnapping children of the targeted group. It is unclear if all these conditions, or only one or two, have to be fulfilled for the murder to be called a genocide. It is unclear when a mass killing becomes a genocide. It is rather pointless to talk about kidnapping of children or preventing births, when all the members of the group are targeted, as was the case in the Shoah, and all the women and children are to be murdered anyway. Also, it is difficult to see shoving people into gas chambers as creating conditions of life designed to prevent the victims' existence. And, in the Shoah, not just certain members of the group were targeted, but all of them. In the case of Rwanda, it was equally problematic. Hutu and Tutsi are not ethnic groups – they speak the same language, have the same culture, and are members of the same religious denominations. The differences were originally class differences, and they were exacerbated by European missionaries and colonialists who introduced a basically racist terminology. Strictly speaking, the description of the Rwandan tragedy as a genocide could be challenged. But of course it was a genocide, so the thing that is wrong is the definition.

There are only beginnings of historical research regarding the history of genocide before the twentieth century, though it is perfectly clear that the treatment of American Indians, throughout the American continent, or the destruction of Carthage, and any number of other events, were genocidal. We need sharper analytical tools than the ones provided to us by the 1948 Convention to call a genocide a genocide when we see it. The reason why the Convention is so problematic is that it was the product of horse-trading between the West and the Soviet Bloc, not the result of an academic discussion. At Soviet insistence, mass murder for political reasons, which we now call politicide, was excluded – obviously, because otherwise the USSR would have been accused of genocide. Religious groups were included, although there is a basic difference between them and ethnic groups. Religious allegiances, at least theoretically, though by no means always practically, are a matter of choice. European Jews and those in Moslem countries threatened with death in the pre-modern period could convert, and thereby save their lives, though not always. But if you are born a Jew, a German, a Russian, an Arab, or a

Chinese, you are stuck with your ethnicity, because after you are born it is too late to choose your parents. There is no logic in including religious groups and not political ones in definitions of genocide, because in theory at least, you can choose your politics, too. Indeed, millions of good communists became good Nazis in Nazi Germany, and then many good Nazis became good communists again in postwar East Germany. Political mass murder, or politicide, is really a form of genocidal mass killing.

In the end, this playing around with definitions, so dear to us academics, is really quite pointless, except that we are stuck with the Convention's definition, and the advantage of course is that it has become part of international law, although it has never been used for the prevention of any genocidal event since 1948. However, we should remember that our definitions are abstractions from reality, and reality is much more complicated than our definitions can be, and rather than trying to fit reality into the abstraction, we should adapt definitions to reality. The reality is that humans are the only mammals that kill each other in large numbers, because quite obviously their psychological make-up makes that possible. The proof of this lies in all our laws that make murder illegal. If there was no inclination to murder, it would be unnecessary to have laws against it. The reason for this inclination, or basic instinct, is, some psychologists tell us, the desire to defend those closest to us, and the territory necessary to maintain them, from real or imagined competition, invasion, or other danger. We are territorial predatory mammals.

If we all have the potential to participate in mass murder, the question arises whether there is any way of stopping mass killings and genocides. On the face of it, the prospects are not rosy. Some years ago, the American sociologist Rudolph J. Rummel estimated the number of civilian victims of governments and political movements in the first 87 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the dates were chosen arbitrarily – at 169 millions, as compared to the 34 million soldiers who died during the same period, which includes the two world wars, or four times more civilians than soldiers. 38 million of the 169 million civilians died in genocides, as defined by the Convention, and of these close to 6 millions died in the Shoah. Rummel, who in the meantime has increased his estimates considerably, calls the murder of civilians democide, or the murder of people, and that includes all mass killings, including genocides according to the Convention. The

American expert in international law, David Scheffer, calls the same phenomenon by the name “mass atrocities”. The overall picture is very clear: mass killings of groups of civilians go on, uninterrupted.

However, just as one can say that mass murder has been with us since time immemorial, and most probably before that, one can also say that the opposite, namely selfless sacrifice for others, has been with us as well. The yearning for death and the yearning for life are both, apparently, part of our basic make-up. In the real world, as well as in the imagined world of literature which reflects it, they have a parallel existence. Righteous among the nations, and that includes whole communities, even whole ethnic communities, such as the Danes, rescued Jews; righteous Turks and Kurds rescued Armenians during the Armenian genocide; righteous Hutu rescued Tutsi in Rwanda. Often, such activities involved real self-sacrifice for a total stranger. It is that other pole of our mental and instinctual being that makes action against genocide a realistic prospect, albeit a very difficult and perhaps remote one. The life instinct comes from the same source, it seems, as the instinct to murder: we are herd animals; if we do not belong to one herd, then, willy-nilly, we belong to another. It is very difficult for a herd animal to exist alone. And as herd animals we have developed the instincts of togetherness, of sympathy, of love, of collaboration, of willingness to rescue, because unconsciously, we realize that the rescued person will be a friend one can rely on.

There is no doubt that we live in a small world which is threatened by human self-destruction, made possible by technological advances. Such threats include not only genocides, but also power struggles of nations armed with weapons of mass destruction; ecological disasters created by human interference with nature; a volatile economic structure that can endanger huge numbers of people; and epidemics against which there is no known cure. Also, and centrally important, unequal distribution of wealth creates mass suffering and social and political upheavals. Genocides, therefore, are not the only major problem we humans have created for ourselves. And, of course, one always has to remember that the human race began its meteoric rise not a few thousand years ago as the Bible says, but some hundreds of thousands of years ago, and its presence on this planet is limited in time. Sooner or later we shall disappear, having run our course, so to speak. With us will disappear our cultures, our achievements and failures, our God or Gods, our

beliefs, our hopes and our vanities. But what we want to do, I think, is that that should happen later rather than sooner.

Technological advances have been registered not only in weaponry, and other fields that threaten us, but also in areas that may protect humanity from the dangers it faces. Thus, in the US, social scientists have developed sociological and political models based on a large number of variables that make it possible to make realistic risk assessments of genocidal developments. It is possible today to identify places in the world where mass murder may develop unless something is done to prevent it. It would have been quite impossible to predict the Holocaust by these means, so here again the Holocaust is a special case. But no prediction was needed in the Rwandan or Darfur cases; not only prediction, but close to actual knowledge was and is there, and it was political will, not early warning, that was and is needed to prevent genocidal developments. Today, some major governments, as well as the UN, have such predictive means at their disposal.

At the genocide prevention Forum in Stockholm, on January 27, 2004, I suggested four types of what one may call genocidal events, or mass atrocities: one, genocides according to the Convention's definition; two, politicides, that is mass murders with political, economic, and social motivations; three, ethnic cleansing, when the purpose is to eliminate an ethnic group as such; and four, global genocidal ideologies that preach murderous propaganda and practice mass murder, such as Radical Islam today, and in the past National Socialism and communism. No World Peace is in sight, but in the future maybe some very small steps towards a reduction of the dangers could be achieved. You see, I don't believe in utopias: to turn Lord Acton's famous quote around, utopias always kill, and radical utopias such as Nazism, communism, nationalism, religious extremism, and the like, kill radically. I therefore also do not believe in a good world, or in the coming of an earthly or a heavenly Messiah to deliver us from ourselves. I think and I hope that with a lot of luck and very hard work, we may possibly make the world in which we live a tiny little bit better than it now is. It is worth spending one's life to try and do that.

What are the options? We have to test options not only in learned papers, though we must have those as a necessary basis, but by confronting reality in the form of the

terrible problems the world faces with genocides present and future. Let me take the example of Darfur, which is clearly a genocide, even according to the Convention. We should discuss the relationship between Darfur and the genocides that preceded it, and those that will follow it, as follow it they will.

What can be done about Darfur? UN troops have been sent there, consisting of African soldiers, their numbers insufficient, with only some of them well-trained, and with no clear mandate to protect civilians. Helicopters and other military necessities have not been supplied by UN member countries. The Sudanese government is, in effect, persecuting humanitarian organizations, and hundreds of thousands of Africans have lost all they had and vegetate helplessly and hopelessly in DP camps. Massive, slow, death, is the result. The first to die are children. The women are subject to mass rape, as part of a clear genocidal policy. The Security Council is helpless, because China has oil concessions in Sudan and will not agree to any robust UN policy ensuring the lives of the African victims. Russia and the Arab League help in protecting the Sudanese government. Without giving up on the UN, alternative ways have to be found to confront the situation. Regional alliances, the creation of blocs of countries dedicated to act against actual and potential mass atrocities have to be considered. Some academics are now working on what we call a tool-box, that is, a series of graded non-military measures, to be employed in situations where genocide is threatened, before it actually happens, and possible unarmed or even armed intervention to stop it if it does happen. But even if we have a tool-box like that, the really crucial question will be one of pressure on the political world. What do we do in order to help create the political will to stop mutual mass killings? The general idea is to create coalitions of pressure groups that will come with practical proposals, with media campaigns, and similar actions, and that will work through politicians and sympathetic governments. Will this succeed? I have not the slightest idea. All I know is that we must try.

What is the connection between all that and the Holocaust, and why do we here deal with the Holocaust as the paradigmatic case, and do not take another genocidal event as the measuring rod for comparisons? It seems to be clear that commentators as well as politicians constantly compare Darfur to Rwanda; but then, they compare Rwanda with the Holocaust, as the paradigmatic genocide. It is, I think, beside the point that these

comparisons are faulty. Clearly, both Rwanda and Darfur were or are caused by developments that one may call pragmatic: the desire for power and for land, contrary to the Holocaust. But they are of the same type of human actions as the Holocaust – mass murder of designated target groups, which we now call genocides or genocidal events, or genocidal mass murders, or mass atrocities. The reason, I think, for viewing the Holocaust as the standard for comparisons, whether such comparisons are valid or not, is the slow, usually quite unconscious awareness of the fact that the Holocaust was the most extreme form of that malady that racks the human race, an illness that is a danger to humanity's very existence – not the only danger, as I said, but a very serious one – and the Holocaust has therefore become the paradigm for genocidal threats generally. Today, hardly a week passes without another literary work being published, another piece of art being created, another piece of music, and of endless research in all fields of the humanities and social science, dealing with the genocide of the Jews. Because of the paradigmatic quality of the Shoah, this seems likely to continue.

Nor is this a matter dealing with the recent past only. Jews are, today, for the first time since 1945, again threatened, openly, by a radical Islamic genocidal ideology, whose murderous message has to be taken more seriously than the Nazi one was, unfortunately, at the time of the November Pogrom. The direct connection between the Pogrom, the war preparations, World War II, the Shoah, and present-day genocidal events and threats is more than obvious. There are repetitions here that hark back to the genocide of the Jews. The Shoah was unprecedented. But it was a precedent, and that precedent is being followed. We should do everything we can to stop that.