

# Kristallnacht and FDR's failure to Act

An Interview with Dr. Rafael Medoff

by [Jerry Gordon](#) and Rod Bryant (December 2018)



Synagogue in Hanover, Germany burning during Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938

**November 9-10, 2018** marked the 80th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the “night of broken glass” in 1938 when Hitler perpetrated a nation-wide pogrom in response to the assassination of a German diplomat Ernst Von Rath at the Paris Embassy by a 17-year-old Polish Jew Herschel Grynspan. The Nazi SA and Hitler youth rampaged through Germany and Austria

7,500 Jewish homes and businesses were ransacked, 267 synagogues were attacked, 76 were destroyed, nearly 100 Jews were killed. Most significantly 30,000 Jewish men were sent to Nazi concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. German Jews were fined over \$400 million for the cleanup of the Nazi pogrom. It marked the end for Jews in Germany. Many consider it as the precursor for Hitler's Final Solution, the murder of six million European Jewish men, women and children in unspeakable ways.

FDR responses to Kristallnacht at press conferences a few days after the Nazi pogrom did not challenge the Hitler regime, not even identifying the victims as Jews. This contrasted with headlines in US and foreign newspapers drawing attention to the Nazi existential threats to Germany's Jews. FDR's State Department even ruled against offers by the Governor of the US Virgin Islands to take in German Jewish refugees. There was the little-known offer of the Dominican Republic, made earlier than Kristallnacht in 1938, to take in over 100,000 German Jews- in the end they took in less than 1,000 in the settlement of Sosua. The FDR Administration were concerned that these German Jewish refugees would ultimately infiltrate the US. That was reflected less than six months later in June 1939 when the 930 German Jews aboard the fateful ship the St. Louis were barred entry by the State Department, many of whom went to their deaths in Nazi killing centers. FDR didn't want strong action against Hitler's Germany for fear of triggering a war and impacting trade during the economic Depression. Hollywood's Jewish moguls didn't want to lose export markets in German for film productions. Many Jewish leaders remain silent for fear of anti-Semitism, while a few demonstrated against the Hitler Nazi regime. By contrast the British took in 10,000 Jewish children in the so-called Kinder transports and 15,000 young Jewish women as nannies and maids.

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To address these troublesome aspects of FDR's reactions to Kristallnacht and what lessons for might be drawn for policymakers in the 21st Century. Rod Bryant and Jerry Gordon of Israel News Talk Radio -Beyond the Matrix reached out to Dr. Rafael Medoff, director of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies to discuss the Nazi pogrom against Germany's Jews- on its 80th anniversary, FDR's and American Jewish leaders responses and the implications for policymakers facing existential threats today like Iran's nuclear and genocidal threats to wipe the Jewish nation of Israel off the map of the world.

**Rod:** Jerry, we have as our guest Dr. Rafael Medoff of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust studies. We will be discussing Kristallnacht and what took place on the Night of Broken Glass in Germany and in Austria in November 1938. You have an eyewitness story about the Nazi pogrom.

**Jerry:** Yes, when I was an undergraduate at Boston University in my freshman year, I had two Jewish roommates. One was from Maine while the other one was the son of German Jewish refugees who had come to the United States. His father was incarcerated along with 30,000 German Jewish men in one of the three German Concentration Camps during Night of Broken Glass on November 9th and 10th, 1938. In 1935 he was subject to the Nuremberg racial laws in Germany. He was then Captain of his town's soccer team and yet he was denied being an active sportsman. On Kristallnacht—the Night of Broken Glass—he was

one of thousands of German Jewish men incarcerated in Dachau for three months. His wife bribed the Camp Commandant to get him released. They were fortunate enough to subsequently leave Germany within a year with a visa obtained by a relative in the US.

**Rod:** An amazing story. We are also going to hear some details that highlight the difficulties that many Jewish people had in Germany at the time trying to escape Nazi Germany. We are talking about the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht and what does that mean for the 21st Century? An important question to ask. We are destined to repeat the past if we don't remember it in the future. Rafael what was Kristallnacht—the Night of Broken Glass—that occurred in Germany and Austria on November the 9th and 10th in 1938? What triggered it?

**Rafael:** Thanks for having me back on your show. The Kristallnacht pogrom which took place in Germany in 1938, 80 years ago was the transformation of the persecution of German Jews under Hitler from discrimination to outright violence. It was a nationwide, government orchestrated orgy of violence, mass attacks on Jewish homes, Jewish businesses, synagogues which involved among other things the shattering of so many windows of the homes of German Jews and their storefronts that came to be known as the Night of the Broken Glass, Kristallnacht in German. It involved far more than the breaking of windows. Hundreds of synagogues were burned to the ground. Nearly 100 Jews were murdered in mob violence. Thirty thousand German Jews were dragged off to German concentration camps. It was a night long hurricane of violence which resulted in the devastation of German Jewry and a complete change in the way that German Jews saw their future. The international community now understood Hitler's purpose about the Jews.

**Rod:** Rafael, what was the atmosphere within the German government and society that gave permission to do something like this?

**Rafael:** For the previous five years since Hitler's rise to power early in 1933, the policy of the German government had been to gradually push Jews out of German society. This was accomplished by legislation which forced Jews out of many professions. The Nuremberg laws of 1935 stripped German Jews of their citizenship. It was a gradual exclusion of German Jews from the wider society as well as a massive propaganda effort by the German government through its schools and from the popular culture to demonize Jews. It portrayed them as a terrible menace to German society and ultimately as the enemy: the cause of all Germany's recent economic and other problems.

**Jerry:** Rafael, what triggered this Nazi pogrom on November 9th and 10th, 1938? Ironically it was also the 15th anniversary of the rise of Hitler in the 1923 Putsch wasn't it?

**Rafael:** Yes. The German government had been planning for some time to unleash an event like this. We know from the documents that the Kristallnacht pogrom was not spontaneous. Hitler wanted it to appear as if it was spontaneous, so he had a pretext, a distraught Polish Jewish teenager shot and killed a lower level diplomat at the German Embassy in Paris in November 1938. That was obviously a thin excuse. The attacks that took place, the massive violence by the Nazis throughout the country, clearly had to have been planned and prepared long in advance. It would have been impossible for there to have been so many coordinated attacks throughout Germany that

night.

**Rod:** You are saying that this was coordinated within Nazi party elements and timed for such event to take place?

**Rafael:** It is interesting, in retrospect, because we think of the Nazis as having been so focused and single-minded in their anti-Semitism that it may seem surprisingly, they even felt like they needed a pretext. In other words, why not just do it since they were planning to do it anyway. The truth is that Hitler and his regime always had one eye on public opinion. Now again we are talking about before World War II, before the mass murder of the Jews by the Germans. During the 1930s, the Germans were anxious to have cordial relations with other countries to have ongoing trade, for example, with the United States and with other countries in the West. They thought in terms of having to explain their actions, hence using the assassination in Paris as a kind of excuse or pretext. No reasonable person felt that the massive mob violence and destruction wreaked on the German Jewish community could possibly in any way be perceived as somehow a "response" to the action of a distraught Jewish teenager in France.

**Jerry:** Rafael, the Nazi regime also engaged in what we would call economic piracy. They imposed fines of \$400 million on the German Jewish community for the "clean-up" of the violence and destruction of property that they perpetrated. How devastating was that to the economic lifeblood of the German Jewish community?

**Rafael:** Keep in mind that during the previous five years

Germany's Jews were undergoing constant economic deprivation. This was again part of the process of destroying, dehumanizing German Jews in order to drive them out of German society. The astronomical fine that the Nazis leveled on the Jews in the wake of the pogrom was just the capstone of a process that had been going on for years. It was part of the overall Nazi strategy of starving the Jews out and trying to drive them out of German society and then out of the country entirely.

**Jerry:** Of the 30,000 German Jewish men who were incarcerated that night, how many of them were released?

**Rafael:** The camps that we refer to in 1938 were concentration camps, not death camps as we later know. They were brutal detention facilities. Many of the people arrested on the night of Kristallnacht were released on condition that they would emigrate from Germany within a very short time. The problem was that there were so few countries that willing to open their doors and take them. It was possible to be released from Dachau or Buchenwald, but it was made on condition, that they would leave and to find a place to go was an extremely difficult task for a German Jew in 1938.

**Rod:** What was the United States' response to that? Did they take anybody in? What was the reaction of the FDR administration?

**Rafael:** The reaction involves several aspects. One was President Roosevelt's immediate response. The second aspect was the question of immigration. Was the United States willing to take in any of the Jews trying to flee from Hitler? The

third question was whether the Roosevelt administration would take any other sort of actions such as breaking diplomatic relations or ending trade with Germany. Each of those was a very important question that was on the minds of the American public and the American Jewish Community in the aftermath of the Nazi pogrom.

**Rod:** Did FDR and his Jewish advisors make any definitive response to go ahead and take people in?

**Rafael:** If you read the typical history book you will see the claim that Roosevelt responded quickly, forcefully, unequivocally in condemning the Nazi pogrom. That however is not the case. Now it may seem odd that there would even be a dispute about condemning it because how could anyone not condemn it, a massive pogrom. In fact, other world leaders did not condemn it. Germany's neighbors like France and England were so nervous about the possibility of a conflict with Hitler that their leaders did not even issue specific condemnations of the pogrom. President Roosevelt's response that was different than that of the British, the French and other world leaders. In fact, he did not initially condemn it. Two days after Kristallnacht, the Nazi pogrom, Roosevelt had his weekly press conference and he was asked by a reporter whether he had any statement about this massive violence going on in Germany. Keep in mind that Kristallnacht was no secret. It was front page headline news around the world.

Later, during the Holocaust mass murder period, the New York Times and other major newspapers were notorious for burying the news, but not Kristallnacht. It was well known. Roosevelt was asked about it immediately at his next press conference. The reporter asked the President whether he had any statement



to make regarding the attacks on the Jews in Germany which were front page news in the United States and around the world. President Roosevelt's response was no, I don't have any statement to make. Four days later, a week after the Nazi pogrom, there had been a massive outcry among the news media, members of Congress, American Jewish groups and others, Roosevelt made a comment at his next press conference. At that point he read a prepared statement, it was very short just a couple of paragraphs in which he said he found it hard to believe that such a thing could happen during in the 20th Century. The statement was good as far as it went. However, it didn't go very far. Remarkably it didn't mention the Jews in Germany and it didn't mention the perpetrators, the Nazis. There was no reference to either who had committed this wanton act of violence and who had been the victims. It was a vague statement. Yet, it was more than the leaders of other countries had been willing to issue. However, in retrospect, it was remarkably vague. This is a week after the pogrom and after the President already had an opportunity to condemn it at his previous press conference.

It's easy to forget this because we think of FDR as having prepared America for the war against Nazi Germany and its elimination in World War II. Up until World War II it was the policy of the Roosevelt administration to maintain friendly, diplomatic and economic trade relations with the Germans. The President was very reluctant to specifically criticize any German government policy. In fact, until Kristallnacht we had never read anything in public about Hitler's treatment of the Jews.

**Rod:** If anything, he had some praise of Mussolini on his Italian fascist regime at the time. We know that FDR always had a difficult time supporting rescue of Jews during World

War II. We have talked about this in previous interviews with you.

**Jerry:** Rafael, how did American Jewish leaders react to the existential threats to Germany's Jews?

**Rafael:** The immediate reaction of American Jewish leaders following the Kristallnacht pogrom was subdued. Most leaders in American Jewish organizations were very nervous about the idea of publicly protesting the treatment of Jews, of publicly calling for the U.S. Government to do anything to help the Jews being persecuted by Hitler. It was a time when many American Jews felt like they weren't fully accepted by American society and didn't have any right to speak out and to ask for the US Government to consider their concerns. I hasten to add that President Roosevelt could have done a great deal to help the Jews trying to flee from Germany regardless of what American Jewish leaders felt or said. It wasn't necessary to ask the US Government to do anything special for them and here's what I mean. The US Government had territories such as the Virgin Islands in which Jewish refugees could have been admitted without tampering with American immigration laws without going to any special trouble or expense. In fact, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr. was the only Jewish member of FDR's cabinet to specifically propose to the President that he allow German Jews to go to the Virgin Islands on tourist visas until the situation in Germany was safer for them to return. What is especially interesting is that the Governor of the Virgin Islands, Lawrence Kramer and the Legislative Assembly of the Virgin Islands publicly offered to open their doors to Jewish refugees in the aftermath of Kristallnacht. The Secretary of the Treasury was quietly urging the President to do that and yet the President refused, and Secretary of State Cordell Hull gave Morgenthau

the answer. He said he had discussed it with the President and they had decided that no Jewish refugees could be allowed into the Virgin Islands because they didn't have a return address in which they would go when the tourist visas expired. The tourist visa in those days had a requirement that you knew someplace you could go back to. So that you wouldn't overstay your visa and remain in America or on American territory. Secretary Hull said that these Jews didn't have a safe return address because they wouldn't be safe in Nazi Germany. This was a kind of Catch-22, that they weren't being allowed in because there was no return address for them to go back to. Of course, they couldn't return there because it was unsafe so that explains why just a few months later in 1939, the Roosevelt Administration turned away the Jewish refugee ship the St. Louis with 930 German Jews aboard asking for haven in the U.S. At that time in the Spring of 1939, Secretary Morgenthau again raised the question of allowing them into the Virgin Islands and they were turned away again on that technicality, as an excuse.

**Rod:** Rafael, couldn't the President with an executive order have changed that obstacle so that the US could bring these German Jewish refugees into the Virgin Islands because there was no resistance from the territory itself?

**Rafael:** Right, an executive order was not necessary. They simply could have been admitted as tourists on tourist visas through the regular procedures. The truth is issuing an executive order or stirring up a big public controversy might not have been to his advantage, but it wasn't necessary. This is a way in which many Jews could have been saved without causing a big fuss or having a big public fight about you're not to allow them in because they weren't being admitted as immigrants to the US mainland. However, the President refused

because he did not want to have many Jewish refugees in such proximity to the mainland U.S. for fear that they might then be able to make their way into America.

**Jerry:** Rafael, wasn't there one country in that vicinity, the Dominican Republic, under a dictator called Trujillo who offered to accept German Jews?

**Rafael:** Yes, the Dominican Republic offered a few months before Kristallnacht to take in 100,000 German Jews. A small number were admitted, about a thousand. They were settled in a part of the Dominican Republic known as Sosua. The project to settle Jewish refugees in the Sosua region of the Dominican Republic ultimately failed. It never grew much beyond the first one thousand admitted. The reason we know this is from the documents that the Roosevelt Administration did not want many Jews settled in the Caribbean for the same reason they didn't want them going to the Virgin Islands. It was the fear that if they were that close to the United States that they would then be able to infiltrate the mainland. Roosevelt's State Department actively discouraged the Dominican Republic from taking in any more German Jews than that small group of about one thousand.

**Rod:** In contrast to FDR denying sanctuary to German Jewish victims in the wake of Kristallnacht what did the British do?

**Rafael:** Ironically the British Government headed by Neville Chamberlain, who is properly reviled by us today for his attempts to appease Nazi Germany, did considerably more for German Jewish refugees after Kristallnacht than President

Roosevelt. The British took in 10,000 German Jewish children, the Kindertransport, and they admitted another 15,000 young German Jewish women as nannies and housekeepers. So about 25,000 young German Jews were saved thanks to the British Government, whereas President Roosevelt did nothing more than extend the tourist visas for five thousand German Jews and who happened to be in the US on tourist visas at the time of Kristallnacht.

**Jerry:** How has the current U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum exhibit on America's response to the Holocaust and recent FDR biographies continue to whitewash his response to Kristallnacht and the Holocaust?

**Rafael:** The U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. recently opened a special exhibit on America's response to the Holocaust and there is a section about the Kristallnacht pogrom and how President Roosevelt responded. Unfortunately, the portrayal of the President's response was quite exaggerated and misleading. For example, it highlights Roosevelt's condemnation of the Nazi pogrom a week later when it does not acknowledge the fact as we discussed, when he had an opportunity to condemn it. Then two days after the pogrom at his weekly press conference and he refused to do so. Interestingly, that refusal is not mentioned and the visitor to the current exhibit has no idea that there was an earlier press conference at which the President would not comment on the Kristallnacht pogrom. That is one aspect of it. Another important failing of the U.S. Holocaust Museum's exhibit on this subject is that there is no mention of the fact that the Roosevelt administration continued its policy of a normal economic relations and trade with Nazi Germany despite the pogrom. The whole subject of President Roosevelt pursuing friendly relations with the Nazis in the years prior to World

War II is not mentioned at all in the exhibit. The third aspect in which the exhibit is misleading is regarding immigration. The exhibit claims that Roosevelt allowed 15,000 German Jews who were already in America on tourist visas to stay in the country in fact the number was about 5,000. The fact that it was only about 5,000 was a well-established figure based on historical documents. For some reason the people at the Holocaust Museum had decided that they wanted to present President Roosevelt in the best possible light. The exhibit in that and other respects is quite distorted in its depiction of the President.

**Jerry:** What lessons can we take away from the history of Kristallnacht in the 21st Century?

**Rafael:** I suppose the most important lesson has to do with how the United States views its role in the world. Should our government act abroad when there are unwanted human rights violations. When there is genocide. When there are dictators who threaten the United States or threaten its allies such as Israel. This is a very important question which has not gone away in the years since Kristallnacht. On the contrary, it has become more serious. It is obvious that had the United States taken some sort of pre-emptive action against Hitler in the 1930's, history could have been very different. The first and most obvious lesson of Kristallnacht is to not wait until there is a genocidal pogrom but to use America's power to try to pre-empt these kinds of horrors. If you think about for example the Syrian civil war, if the U.S. had acted against the Assad regime a few years ago, there never would have been this Syrian refugee problem which bedevils the rest of the world. You know we have had millions of Syrians fleeing and then leading to all kinds of other crises regarding immigration to Europe and the United States. By taking pre-

emptive action beforehand the US could forestall much bigger problems later. This certainly is relevant regarding the question of American policy towards Iran. Should the United States wait until a point where the Iranian's nuclear program is so advanced that it will be too late to stop it, or should the U.S. be acting now as it's starting to reimpose sanctions to crack down on Teheran in the hope of pre-empting a later catastrophe?

**Jerry:** Rafael, does that include support for what we would consider as allies within these dictatorial countries? Here I speak about the minorities for example in Iran and in Syria, specifically the Kurds and the Baloch.

**Rafael:** Every situation is unique, but I think there is a broad principle here that most Americans would support. That the United States, while it is not responsible for every Civil War or every problem that goes on anywhere in the world, should take an interest when there is a danger that some Civil War or other crisis could mushroom to the point where it could be a threat to America or to its ally Israel. Thus, America should, facts and the legal authority authorized, do something earlier rather than wait until it is too late.

**Jerry:** What is it that we can understand from Kristallnacht about its heritage with respect to what the American Jewish community should have done? We know for example that Roosevelt had Jewish advisors who basically wanted nothing to do with this Nazi pogrom. We also know, for example, that the Jewish moguls in Hollywood had continued movie trade with Nazi Germany right up until the declaration of war. What is it that

we can do in the Jewish community to basically oppose what you are talking about?

**Rafael:** Broadly speaking I think it's a question of self-confidence. In those days American Jews felt very uneasy about their place in American society. They felt that they didn't necessarily have a right so to speak out, but things have changed. The American Jewish community today is much more mature, much more sophisticated and organized and confident that American Jews have the same right as any other American citizens to speak out for issues that are of concern to them.

**Rod:** We are living in a time in which we have seen a rise of anti-Semitism, a shooting massacre in a synagogue recently in Pittsburgh, and there have been numerous times in the past few years of swastikas being painted on synagogue walls, attacks on Jews in New York and elsewhere. Obviously, we don't have a concerted effort from our government within the United States or in France or Germany that addresses awareness of anti-Semitism. What do we do to address this? We hope that our show is doing that. What do you think would help to combat such negative images toward Jews around the world?

**Rafael:** It starts with the tone that is set for society by our political leaders, by our cultural leaders and others who shape the way society looks at this sort of thing. I think in general today we can certainly say that there is a wide condemnation and vigorous opposition to anti-Semitism both from our political leaders and from those who shape our culture and our intellectual discourse. In that sense American society has come a long way since the 1930's when leaders were reluctant to speak out. It is critically important to always keep a spotlight on the haters to actively combat them while



of course understanding that a certain amount of bigotry and anti-Semitism probably will always exist. It seems to be a disease of the human condition that will never be entirely eradicated. If civilized society actively confronts and opposes these kinds of trends then there is hope that it will, at least, be kept to a minimum. This pertains to whether anti-Semitism is coming from extremists on the right or extremists on the left, or whether it is from Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam or from the Ku Klux Klan. They may not ever be stamped out completely. However, if we remain vigilant hopefully, they can be kept to a small insignificant force on the fringes of society.

**Rod:** We agree. Thank you so much, Rafael. We really appreciate your input and your research on this matter. One of the benefits that we have is to point out the ugly head of anti-Semitism that shows up in our news feed. It is important for every individual whether you are Jewish or Christian, non-Jewish and secular, it doesn't really matter. We must point out any type of unreasonable hatred toward another people which should not be tolerated in modern society. Jerry and I along with Rafael Medoff would want to encourage you to stand up against these types of unwarranted hatred toward another group of people because their views maybe a little different. God willing, we may someday see a time in which we will all dwell in peace. We can have our different cultural systems, but we can all have peace together. You have been listening to Beyond the Matrix here on Israel News Talk Radio. Rafael thank you so much for being a part of this show regularly. We will see you next week at the same time. Shalom.

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