

IDEAS

The Day of Fate

Kristallnacht, on its 80th anniversary, still offers a potent lesson: We all face the choice between right and wrong, responsibility and recklessness, conscience and complicity.

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At an evening news conference on November 9, 1989, a spokesman for the East German Communist government made a history-altering mistake.

The spokesman had been authorized to say that travel restrictions on East German citizens would be lifted the next day, November 10. Instead, he said that the restrictions were lifted effective immediately.

Within minutes, hundreds of thousands of East Berliners rushed to the checkpoints of the Berlin Wall. Since the erection of the wall in 1961, border guards had killed more than 750 people seeking to escape East Germany. That night, the border guards had heard the same news as everyone else. Their license to kill had been withdrawn. They stood aside. The long-imprisoned citizens of East Berlin rushed

out into West Berlin that night, in what became the greatest and best street party in the history of the world.

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Soon, Berliners east and west began to attack the hated wall, smash it, rip it apart, in what would become the overture to the reunification of the long-divided nation into a single democratic republic.

One of the first orders of business of that reunified Germany was to establish a new national day. What more obvious candidate was there than the ninth of November, the day the wall came tumbling down?

But, no. Germans call November 9 the “day of fate.” Over nearly two centuries, November 9 has been the day when the profoundest choices, for good or ill, are thrust before German leaders and people. On this day, the most hopeful possibilities and the darkest realities have presented themselves—reminding Germans and not only Germans that of all history’s forces, human agency can be the most powerful and most mysterious. On November 9, again and again, paths have diverged between better and worse futures—not only for Germans, but for the world. November 9, 1989, could not be a day of celebration in reunited Germany, because the date also conjured one of the most evil events in German history: Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938.

Until November 1938, the Nazi program for Germany’s Jews was one of humiliation, segregation, and exploitation. Recent scholarship has drawn uncomfortable parallels between the Nazi subordination of the Jews before 1938 and the Jim Crow system of the American South at the same time. In the half decade leading up to 1938, German Jews were expelled from the civil service and from teaching posts. They were forbidden to marry Gentiles and risked murderous punishment for nonmarital sexual relations. They lost their licenses to practice medicine and law. They were barred from using park benches and swimming pools. They were excluded from Germany’s universities, then its high schools. They were expelled from orchestras and other cultural institutions. At every turn,

they were economically defrauded and robbed: subjected to economic boycotts, punitively taxed, denied health insurance and other social benefits, and forced to sell assets at knockdown prices to regime cronies.

Yet through the end of 1937, it remained possible to hope that the Nazi persecution might still respect some last limits of humanity. While many individual Jews suffered assaults and some were murdered in the early years of the regime, systematic killing of Jews solely because of their religion still hovered over the horizon. Surely in an advanced and cultured nation, some decency must still constrain uttermost barbarity?

Eighty years ago this week, the last of those illusions was smashed like broken glass.

The year had been one of escalating adventurism by Adolf Hitler's regime. In March, German forces rolled into and annexed Austria. Jeering stormtroopers forced elderly Viennese Jews to scrub cobblestones on their hands and knees. Almost overnight, a community of 180,000 was subjected to the dehumanizing ordinances that had been piled on the Jews of Germany over the past half decade.

Over the summer, Hitler pushed Europe to the brink of war by demanding the carve-up of Czechoslovakia. His seeming triumph at Munich in September actually left Hitler frustrated and angry. He had been forced to confront how unready Germany was for a possibly long war, and how relieved his subjects were when war was averted. Deprived of an external enemy for the time being, Hitler turned on his enemy within: the Jews of the new Greater German Reich.

The next month, Hitler got his pretext.

A young Polish Jewish exile, whose family had first been impoverished then rendered stateless by Nazi policies, struck back by assassinating a German diplomat in Paris on the night of November 7, 1938.

The Nazi leadership seized on the killing as proof of a global Jewish plot against Germany. Brownshirts were ordered to attack Jewish lives and property—and police were ordered to stand aside. Almost every important synagogue in Germany was set ablaze, Jewish homes and apartments were invaded and plundered, and the few remaining Jewish-owned shops were smashed and looted. At least 100 Jews died in the pogrom, according to the unreliable official figures, almost certainly many more. Thousands were sent to concentration camps. After it was all over, insurance companies were forbidden to compensate Jews for the damage

done to them. The state expropriated to itself the proceeds instead, and then imposed further massive fines upon the Jewish community.

At the end of 1937, some 350,000 Jews had remained in Germany, down from a 1932 population of 437,000. In the 10 months after Kristallnacht, more than 115,000 fled the unified German-Austrian Reich—in most cases, leaving behind virtually all their possessions to be stolen by the state.

Kristallnacht opened a new chapter in the Nazi extermination project. To that point, the regime had used murder as a means to terrorize Jews into emigrating. After the November pogrom, it was suddenly thinkable that murder might mutate into an end in itself—into outright genocide, a word that had not yet been coined.

So it was not possible to establish November 9 as the new German national day after the country's reunification. That honor was set for October 3, the date of the legal union of the two Germanys in 1990.

Yet November 9 retains its place in memory as Germany's "day of fate," the date—like Tisha B'Av on the Hebrew calendar—on which history again and again seems to turn.

On November 9, 1848, the German democrat Robert Blum was shot to death by a Habsburg firing squad in Vienna. Blum's execution would be interpreted after his death as the final extinguishing of the liberal hopes of 1848 that Germany could overthrow its kings and princes and be united as a liberal republic. Germany would be united, all right, but as an authoritarian and militaristic regime under an emperor.

On November 9, 1918, the last of those emperors abdicated as his armies dissolved in defeat. Another German democrat, Philipp Scheidemann, would rush to the window of the Reichstag that same day to proclaim another attempt at a liberal republic, the one we remember as Weimar.

Five years later, a fascist agitator named Adolf Hitler attempted to topple that republic. After rousing his followers with an impassioned speech in a Munich beer hall on the night of November 8, he marched 3,000 Brownshirts into the center of the city the next morning. Hitler expected the city authorities to surrender to him. Instead, shots erupted, and more than a dozen Nazis were killed. One more lucky bullet could have altered world history. Instead, Hitler ran away with a dislocated shoulder.

The anniversary of the putsch would become a day of commemoration for the Nazi Party. On the evening of November 8, Hitler would annually return to the Munich beer hall and rant and rave through hours of cheers and applause. The event became such a routine that it enabled one of the most nearly successful of the assassination attempts on Hitler. A lone working-class German, Georg Elser, built a bomb and secreted it within a pillar of the beer hall near Hitler's usual speaking place in advance of the commemoration on November 8, 1939.

Everything under Elser's control worked flawlessly: The massive bomb detonated at 9:20 p.m., bringing down much of the ceiling of the beer hall. Had Hitler still stood in his expected place, he would have been killed, along with much of the senior Nazi leadership: Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, Alfred Rosenberg, and many others. But bad luck befell Elser and the world. Foggy weather between Munich and Berlin prompted Hitler to bring the start time of his speech forward from the usual 9 p.m. to 8 p.m., and then to cut its length to only an hour. Hitler and his entourage departed the hall at 9:07, and it promptly emptied out after him. Only about 120 people still lingered at the time of the explosion. Half of them were injured; eight were killed. Elser was captured by the Gestapo as he tried to cross into Switzerland. He was tortured, sent to Dachau, and executed—apparently on Hitler's personal order—in April 1945. He left behind an epitaph: "I hoped to prevent greater bloodshed by my death." A 17-meter steel silhouette of his face now rises above Berlin's Wilhelmstrasse, a couple hundred meters from where Hitler's chancery once stood.

What is now the past was once the future. What is now shame was once choice. Germany's day of fate, November 9, belongs not only to the killers and looters of the Brownshirts but also to men like Elser, Scheidemann, and Blum, who offered Germans a different way from the way they took.

What is now the future will someday be the past. What is now choice may someday be shame. Rarely in history do people confront choices as extreme as those that Germans confronted in the 1930s and '40s. The genius of democratic politics in normal times is that the choices are not extreme at all. Americans and their counterparts across the developed world usually find themselves arguing within narrow bounds about the inevitable trade-offs of collective life. Coalition-building and dealmaking define democratic politics when it is working properly.

It does not always work properly.

Even in our own time, we are confronted with political moments that are not defined by dealmaking as usual, that thrust upon us the stark alternatives of right or wrong, responsibility or recklessness, conscience or complicity. Many feel that this is one of those moments. And may we, in our own days of fate, discover within ourselves the courage and integrity to ensure that our descendants remember our anniversaries with pride, not pain.

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