

**On 15 November 1938 a French diplomat in Berlin analyses the background  
to the pogroms and the resulting international tensions<sup>1</sup>**

Report by Monsieur de Montbas,<sup>2</sup> French chargé d'affaires in Berlin, to Monsieur Georges Bonnet, Minister of Foreign Affairs (received on 29 November 1938), Paris, dated 15 November 1938

The death of Mr von Rath, shot dead in Paris by a Polish Jewish attacker, was the official reason cited in the Reich to justify the excesses of 'the people's anger' of 10th and 11th November and the exceptionally harsh measures which, on 12th November, put the finishing touches to this latest National Socialist offensive against the Jews.

In fact, the assassination of the German diplomat was merely a pretext and the majority of the German public itself was not taken in. In Berlin, as in the rest of the Reich, the man in the street, who, more often than not, watched the disturbances and looting with silent disapproval, soon suspected his leaders of having been delighted with the opportunity that destiny presented in the form of a young, 17-year-old fanatic.

In this respect one could even say that Mr Goebbels's propaganda has achieved quite the opposite effect to what was intended. The more effort made to give the murder a broader meaning and to present Grynszpan's action as a 'historic' crime, the more that average Germans, to the extent that they have not been led astray by Hitlerian fanaticism, have been tempted to detect or invent the ulterior motives that, in their view, could have driven their leaders. It would appear that by brandishing his weapon and cutting and thrusting indiscriminately about him, Mr Goebbels has made it less effective. Nothing is more indicative of this than the rumour, which is circulating here among the ordinary people, that the attack on Mr vom Rath was nothing but a Gestapo plot, in which Grynszpan unwittingly played the role of van der Lubbe in the Reichstag fire,<sup>3</sup> to finally allow the Nazis to brutally settle the Jewish question.

Aside from the Third Reich's principle of using violence whenever possible as a tangible sign of its actual power, it is clear that the Hitler regime's leaders decided to undertake this decisive campaign against Judaism for many reasons.

To all appearances, the main aim is to follow through and bring the policy of antisemitism, which is one of the underpinnings of the new Germany, to its end. Within the general framework of what has already been done, particularly in the form of the ban on Jews practising medicine or law that has been introduced in recent months,<sup>4</sup> the effect of the measures of 12 November and those that are still to come will simply be to

1 Source: *Documents diplomatiques français 1932-1939*, series 2: 1936-1939, vol. 12 (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1978), pp. 569-573. This document has been translated from French.

2 Dr Hugues Barthon de Montbas (b. 1892), diplomat; from 1919 embassy attaché; editor in the French section of the League of Nations, 1920; French chargé d'affaires in Berlin.

3 Marinus van der Lubbe (1909-1934); sentenced to death for setting fire to the Reichstag and executed. During his trial he testified to having acted alone with the aim of encouraging the workers to stage resistance. However, the Nazi regime deemed the fire as evidence of an attempted coup by the Communist Party (KPD) and as a legitimization for the Regulation for the Protection of People and State, which was enacted the following day and handed the authorities far-reaching powers to persecute political opponents. It remained in force until 1945.

4 See Introduction, pp. 18-19.

exacerbate the pariah status of the German Jew, who is condemned to wretched stagnation and gradual disappearance from the Reich. 'We certainly do not want to re-establish the ghettos,' said Mr Goebbels yesterday, 'but we wish to institute complete separation (*schärfste Abtrennung*<sup>5</sup>) between the German people and the Jews.'<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, this policy is currently not without considerable material and moral advantages for the government applying it. In addition to the fine of 1 billion [Reichsmarks], which will contribute to the coffers funding the Four-Year Plan,<sup>7</sup> the requirement that Jews divest themselves of their businesses, workshops, and firms quickly and under the most unfavourable conditions<sup>8</sup> provides a cheap way for the regime's leaders to make themselves popular with the growing German capitalist class, who do not know what to do with their money, and to curry favour with the German artisans and traders who, until now, had to vie with Jewish competitors. In Vienna, for example, where there were a particularly large number of Jewish firms, we have been witnessing for some time a *rush* of Germans from the rest of the Reich coming to buy the businesses, buildings, and properties surrendered by the Jews at low prices. It compensates for economic supply difficulties and is a distraction from growing discontent in trade and industrial circles.

However, on closer analysis, these reasons played only a secondary role in the decisions taken by the Führer and his more radical lieutenants in this case, or, at the very least, other reasons precipitated the decisions. Much of the background to German policy in the last few days becomes clear if one examines the part played by Mr Goebbels in the decision-making.

The Goebbels case is not new. This embassy studied it recently. The Minister of Propaganda, whose dissolute private life is common knowledge, narrowly avoided a crisis that would have been fatal to his standing with the Führer and to his authority within the regime.<sup>9</sup> With his customary dynamism, Mr Goebbels did not for a moment think of stepping aside, even temporarily. He needed a brilliant counter-attack. He sought out an opportunity to push himself forward, to completely regain the Führer's favour and to publicly display the power he had held on to within the councils of the Third Reich.

In informed Berlin circles, Mr Goebbels is held to have initiated and been entirely responsible for the expressions of 'spontaneous anger' that began on the night of 9/10 November. It is said to have been his orders that the Gestapo was following, and the police made no secret of this. Did the Minister of Propaganda act too quickly or go too far in organizing the pogroms? His appeal to the population on the evening of

5 German in the original.

6 According to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, Goebbels had declared in a Reuters interview on 14 Nov. 1938 that there was no intention to establish special neighbourhoods for Jews. Nonetheless, he continued, there would have to be an end to the 'intolerable state of affairs' whereby Jewish families had more living space at their disposal than Germans: 'Deutschlands Ziel in der Judenfrage: Reinliche Scheidung zwischen Deutschen und Juden', *Völkischer Beobachter* (Berlin edition), 15 Nov. 1938, p. 1.

7 See Doc. 142, 12 Nov. 1938.

8 See Doc. 143, 12 Nov. 1938.

9 Goebbels's affair with the Czech actress Lída Baarová (1914–2000) came to an end in 1938 as a result of Hitler's intervention. Baarová was banned from performing and left Germany.

10 November would suggest so.<sup>10</sup> But the business was already under way. Mr Goebbels's master stroke was then to recruit Marshal Goering, who doubtless felt the need to clear himself of the accusation of 'moderation' that 100 per cent committed Nazis had been making against him since the German-Czechoslovak conflict.

Where the Führer was concerned, Mr Goebbels's task could be nothing but easy. Antisemitism always strikes a chord with Mr Hitler. Nothing could be easier than to touch on it. Furthermore, the timing was very fortunate. Mr Hitler's anti-Jewish policy is being imitated by Il Duce. The race protection law, which the Fascist government has just enacted, constitutes a complete endorsement of Hitler's ideas and encourages the Third Reich to forge ahead.<sup>11</sup> Finally, a violent campaign against Judaism, following Mr vom Rath's murder, would conveniently focus the country's attention, divert it from other subjects, restore unanimity, and cover up certain purges which, it seems, are continuing on the quiet, particularly in the army.<sup>12</sup>

But above all, Mr Goebbels has, with consummate skill, managed to link the Jewish problem in Germany, a domestic issue, to the problem of the campaign against National Socialism abroad, especially in the English-speaking democracies. Through the distorting lens of German propaganda, the murder of Mr vom Rath has become not a response to the expulsion measures taken by the Reich authorities against Polish Jews,<sup>13</sup> but a direct result of the attacks of the American democrats and the leaders of the British opposition on the Hitler regime, a provocative response to the Weimar speech, which had just been given.<sup>14</sup> This is what Mr Goebbels's newspapers, in their usual style, called 'extending the Jewish question to the international sphere'. From this point on, Goebbels could be sure of the Führer's favour. Mr Goebbels had linked his personal rehabilitation offensive to one of the subjects with the strongest impact on Mr Hitler.

A foreign journalist observed a few days ago that in the German press the campaign against international Jewry had replaced all the accusations that are usually made against international Bolshevism. The unofficial editors hardly attack Moscow or communism at all any more. They save all their blows for world Jewry, a huge undefined entity intended to summarize for German public opinion all those who miss no opportunity to undermine Hitler's influence from abroad. There exists a state of war, so to speak, between the Third Reich and international Jewry. The German Jews have just been taken hostage in this war.

10 Goebbels ordered an immediate end to the pogroms, since the 'definitive response' to the Jews would be given through legislation: 'Neue Regelung der Judenfrage angekündigt: Aufruf des Reichsministers Dr. Goebbels an die Bevölkerung', *Völkischer Beobachter* (northern German edition), 11 Nov. 1938, p. 1.

11 On 6 Oct. 1938 the Grand Council of Fascism had issued a Declaration on Race announcing forthcoming legislation. On the Italian legislation, see Doc. 106, 14 Oct. 1938, fn. 10.

12 De Montbas reports in another letter that in terms of a purge in the Wehrmacht the wider public was only aware of the retirement of General Ludwig Beck and General Gerd von Rundstedt: *Documents diplomatiques français 1932-1939*, series 2: 1936-1939, vol. 12, p. 562. Beck had resigned in August 1938 due to Hitler's war plans; von Rundstedt was removed in Oct. 1938 at Hitler's behest because he had initially rejected the conquest of further territory following the occupation of the Sudetenland. He was reinstated in 1939 and appointed commander of Army Group South in the Polish campaign.

13 On the expulsion of the Polish Jews from the German Reich, see Docs. 112 and 113, 28 Oct. 1938.

14 On 6 Nov. 1938 Hitler had given a speech at the Gau rally of the Thuringian National Socialists, in which he had launched a scathing attack above all on the British 'warmongers'. The speech is documented in the *Völkischer Beobachter* (northern German edition), 7 Nov. 1938, pp. 1-2.

To correctly interpret the decisions of 12 November, one should also see them as a retort by the regime and by National Socialist propaganda, a challenge to the opinion of the English-speaking democracies (with France being spared for the moment) from Hitlerian radicalism. The day before yesterday a Party official was saying how pleased he was with the ‘punch in the face that Mr Goebbels had given not only to the Jews of New York and London, but also to English-speaking puritans’. An official at the Foreign Office recently told one of my colleagues: ‘Some circles in America want to pick a fight with Germany. They shall have it. We know for a fact that it is they who are encouraging and stirring up the English opposition, Mr Eden and Mr Churchill, against the Reich.<sup>15</sup> We will hit back harder.’

At the Oranienburg concentration camp, where many Jews arrested ‘as a security measure’ on 10 and 11 November have been sent, the prisoners, who are said to have been treated fairly well so far, are told quite openly that they are considered hostages. Their treatment in future will depend, they are told, on how well ‘Jewish’ agitators abroad behave. *L’Observateur raciste*<sup>16</sup> used the same expression.<sup>17</sup>

Washington soon understood the challenge posed by German antisemitism, and the recall of the US ambassador to Berlin<sup>18</sup> seems to indicate that all the relevant conclusions have been drawn. One might wonder, on the other hand, what is to become of the efforts at German–British rapprochement under these circumstances. What is a matter for serious concern is that the Hitler regime’s leaders seem by their actions to have drawn a line under any policy of moderation and international entente, at least as far as their relations with the United States and England are concerned, at a time when, despite the Saarbrücken and Weimar speeches,<sup>19</sup> one might have thought that the spirit of the Munich Agreement would win out in the end and spread its beneficial effects to Germany’s relationship with the great democratic powers. Is this a sign that the radicals are once again gaining the upper hand in Berlin? Should we conclude that a stable agreement with the Third Reich is impossible and that the violent, savage aspects of the National Socialist ethic will condemn Germany itself to suffer the law of the sword to which it wants to subject its adversaries? Within the Berlin-based diplomatic corps, visible despondency has taken hold of the representatives of the neutral small powers, and some of them openly say that, in their opinion, if nothing changes the course of developments within the Third Reich, a European war may well be inevitable.

15 In Britain, Anthony Eden (1897–1977) and the later prime minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965) were among the most prominent critics of Chamberlain’s appeasement policy. In Feb. 1938 Eden resigned from the post of foreign secretary in protest at the British policy of appeasement towards Germany and Italy.

16 The French in the original translates as ‘The racist observer’: the reference is to the *Völkischer Beobachter* newspaper.

17 Excerpts of a speech given by Goebbels on 13 Nov. 1938 to employees of the Winter Relief Agency were printed by the *Völkischer Beobachter*. In his speech Goebbels stated that two days earlier he had ‘made perfectly clear to representatives of the foreign press in Berlin that every campaign by international Jewry in the world only causes harm to the Jews in Germany’: ‘Alle Geschäfte in kürzester Frist deutsch!’, *Völkischer Beobachter* (northern German edition), 14 Nov. 1938, p. 2.

18 US President Roosevelt had recalled Ambassador Hugh Robert Wilson on 16 Nov. 1938 on the occasion of the November pogroms in order that he report to Washington.

19 On Hitler’s speech in Saarbrücken on 9 Oct. 1938, in which he had again primarily attacked Britain, see Doc. 106, 14 Oct. 1938, fn. 7; on the speech in Weimar, see fn. 14 above.