

■ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies

**Documenting Life
and Destruction**
Holocaust Sources
in Context

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Documenting Life and Destruction
Holocaust Sources in Context

JEWISH RESPONSES TO PERSECUTION

Volume I
1933–1938

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“I do not want to assert prematurely that we have already reached the last circle of hell, for uncertainty is not the worst thing, because in uncertainty there is still hope.”

— Victor Klemperer, Dresden, entry for New Year’s Eve 1938,
quoted from his diary, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the
Nazi Years, 1933–1941* (New York: Random House, 1998), 285.



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CHAPTER 1

CONFRONTING THE NAZI REVOLUTION

EARLY WEEKS

A sense of shock, mitigated by the hope that this new government would not last longer than its predecessors, dominated the early reaction of German Jews to Hitler's appointment. The assessment offered by the weekly journal *Der Israelit* (*The Israelite*) in its February 2, 1933, editorial was fairly typical of the Jewish press. Only a brief aside about ritual slaughter offered a distinctive note, reflecting *Der Israelit's* particular position as the voice of orthodox German Jewry.

Weighing up the dual potential of antisemitism, the editorial's author noted the obvious dangers inherent in anti-Jewish agitation but also implicitly acknowledged that antisemitic rhetoric might function as a safety valve, releasing the pressures of discontent. Beyond the use of temporary enabling acts and the bleak prospect of what he called a "cold pogrom"—most likely he was thinking of state-sanctioned, yet isolated, incidents of violence against individual Jews—the writer was clearly unsure of what the new regime would do. Much depended on how state bureaucrats and law-enforcement agents would react if the Nazi Party program became the road map for government policy.

As a reference to Germany's European great power status reminded the journal's readers, the international situation was another unknown variable in the equation. What pressures could and would foreign powers exert in a world in which the Great Depression and the breakdown of world trade had limited most nations' willingness to look beyond pressing problems at home? How

important would it be for Germany to adhere to the rules of the international community? While it reveals the paper's writers wrestling with these issues, this editorial poses, as indeed it posed its contemporary readers, an interpretative challenge typical of many Jewish public statements in the first year of Nazi rule. There is no reason to doubt the author's sincerity; still, we cannot be sure that some of the writer's bleaker assessments or deeper fears were not being suppressed. The paper may well have been wary of sketching out negative scenarios that might alarm readers or, worse, be seized on by radical groups within the ruling party.

DOCUMENT 1-1: "The New Situation," *Der Israelit*, February 2, 1933, 1–2 (translated from German).

Hitler's cabinet, established on Monday at midday in Berlin, weighs heavily on the minds of all German Jewry and, in fact, all those circles that view the overheated rhetoric of today's exaggerated nationalistic race fanaticism as an obstacle to human civilization and historical progress.

We do not subscribe to the view that Herr Hitler and his friends, now finally in possession of the power they have desired for so long, will enact the proposals circulating in the *Angriff* or the *Völkischer Beobachter* newspapers¹; they will not suddenly divest German Jews of their constitutional rights, lock them away in race ghettos, or subject them to the avaricious and murderous impulses of the mob. They not only cannot do this because many other crucial factors hold their powers in check, ranging from the Reich president to some of the political parties affiliated with them, but they also clearly do not want to go this route, for when one acts as a European world power, the whole atmosphere is more conducive to ethical reflection upon one's better self than to revisiting one's earlier oppositional role: operating as a European world power means that one seeks an enduring place in the harmonious exchange of peoples of culture. And beyond that, it is clear that the powers at Wilhelmstrasse² no longer see demagogic appeals designed to heat up mass gatherings of the *Volk* as strictly necessary. The new Prussian Minister of the Interior [Hermann Göring] can perform a far greater service to the old comrades in arms and party friends by rejuvenating the huge, state civil service along National Socialist lines than by making open concessions to the brutal manifestations of hatred of Jews.

-
1. *Der Angriff* and *Völkischer Beobachter* were Nazi Party newspapers.
 2. This was the site of major government agencies in Berlin.

Not to recognize the gravity of the situation, however, would be inexcusably optimistic. The less the new men in power prove able to perform legislative miracles for the German people as they struggle with hunger and hardship, the more they will find it attractive instead, in order to appear to be doing something, to be seen as at least turning a few sections of the Nazi Party's racial theory program into political practice; this could easily be accomplished—without resorting to the creation of sensationalistic and compromising laws against Jews—rather by staging a “cold pogrom” [*trockenes Pogrom*], by systematically excluding Jews from economic and cultural life, by laying the path for their economic and cultural starvation.

In a National Socialist civil service, to what extent will the old Prussian civil servant's sense of duty prevail over long-nurtured antisemitic instincts and be able to prevent chicanery toward Jews and the abridgment of their legal rights? To what extent will a police force with a National Socialist at its helm be reliable and impartial in every case involving Jews (or even Socialist or Communist citizens)? Only the future will reveal whether these questions and concerns are justified.

The way things stand, it seems to be the lesser evil that—through the Center Party's toleration of the new government and despite a short-term Enabling Act—the foundation on which the parliament and its system of checks and balances rest is upheld (one need only think, for example, of the dangers that might otherwise threaten the *shechitah* [ritual slaughter]). This status quo is more desirable than a vote of no confidence that would bring about dissolution of the Reichstag and, with it, dictatorship without bounds and the introduction of government experiments under the mantle of a state of emergency.

If mainstream German Zionism as embodied in the Zionist Association (**Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland**, or ZVfD), presented a more upbeat assessment, this was not because of any positive expectations associated with the Nazi takeover as such or with German public opinion. Indeed, Zionists took the “seizure of power” as proof that it was futile to expect that antisemitism would ever disappear in the Diaspora. But the hope for Zionists was that the political changes would help to crystallize a new kind of Jewish revival, above all, the clearer emergence of a Jewish national consciousness.

In his first article after Hitler's appointment, **Robert Weltsch**, the editor of the ZVfD's weekly *Jüdische Rundschau*, offered an eloquent and influential German Zionist response. He left the reader in no doubt about the challenges that lay ahead and showed awareness of one of the distinctive features of the

new situation: Nazism was not organized along the lines of traditional political parties, limited to a narrow group of formal members. Instead, it was a broad social movement whose influence reached well beyond the limits of those who held a party membership card. Nevertheless, contained within the threat confronting Germany's Jews was also an opportunity. Jews could no longer forget who they were.

DOCUMENT 1-2: "Inner Security," *Jüdische Rundschau*, February 3, 1933, 45–46³ (translated from German).

Overnight the event that no-one wanted to believe would happen has become fact: Hitler is chancellor of the German Reich. This new development forces us to confront the reality of our underlying situation. [. . .] The truth is that pressure from the National Socialists has affected life in Germany for some time. Quite apart from the fact that Jews are being systematically shut out of economic and cultural life, antisemitism has come to dominate the psychological atmosphere. This actually also has the effect that the Jew again knows that he is a Jew, for no one lets him forget it. But the feeling of being completely surrounded by people who take their spiritual cues from the *Angriff* and the *Völkischer Beobachter*, with their infernal agitation against Jews, is hardly a cheering thought. We were always convinced—and the *Jüdische Rundschau* repeatedly emphasized this—that the National Socialist movement, for some time now no longer a mere political party, has become the authoritative source for public opinion and would in the end also seize positions of power. [. . .]

It would be ridiculous for us to say that Jews are perfect or that they have no faults. It is we ourselves who suffer most from certain phenomena in Jewish life. Zionism clearly recognized forty years ago that our community needed to renew from within. We know that we are dragging remnants of the old ghetto along with us. And likewise—perhaps even worse—we are burdened with the by-products of assimilation, an assimilation that gave us “freedom on the outside, but a feeling of servitude within.” But we do now also have a new Jewry that seeks to free itself both from the remnants of the ghetto and also from the damage brought on by assimilation; a Jewry that has found its way back to itself, that knows its own worth, that fearlessly defends itself, that knows how to maintain distance and keep its composure, that confronts its enemies not with envy and arrogance but with

3. Also printed in *Ja-Sagen zum Judentum: Eine Aufsatzreihe der "Jüdischen Rundschau" zur Lage der deutschen Juden* (Berlin: Verlag der "Jüdischen Rundschau," 1933), 154–58.

a clear countenance. This new Jewry, internally secure, ignores all insults and assaults and keeps its head held high. To make this work, everything depends on freeing the Jews from their atomization and self-estrangement and drawing them together for the Jewish cause.

The *Jüdische Rundschau*'s criticism of the remnants of assimilation was aimed at the German Jewish majority, most notably its biggest organization, the **Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens** (CV). On the night of Hitler's appointment, the CV came out with a statement by its presiding board expressing the conviction that, despite good reasons to mistrust the new government, "no one will dare to touch our constitutional rights" and asked its members to stay calm.⁴ Of course, this was less a confident prediction of what lay ahead than a strategic statement that sought both to allay German Jews' fears and to exhort the new government to exercise moderation. The CV had waged a protracted fight against the Nazi Party in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and clearly many CV leaders must have felt far more serious foreboding in private. Yet, even the pessimists among the Jewish leaders were probably as little prepared as rank-and-file members for the avalanche of disturbing events that followed. Many of those who emigrated early on did so with the expectation of returning after a period of temporary exile.⁵

After the burning of the **Reichstag** building and the restriction of personal rights in late February, Nazi activists began to switch their sights from Communists and others on the political Left toward Jews. The *völkisch* identification of Jews with communism, irrespective of actual facts, abetted this process. In conjunction with the national election on March 5, the CV issued a statement assuring German Jews of its tireless fight against "unwarranted attacks" on Jews and "that Germany will remain Germany and that no one can rob us of our native soil and our Fatherland."⁶

The March election consolidated the Nazis' position without bringing them their hoped for absolute majority. A wave of anti-Jewish measures subsequently swept through German cities. In many localities, Jews were barred from public employment, shops owned by Jews were boycotted, and antisemites unleashed their hostility on the streets with impunity. These disturbing and increasingly frequent incidents did not form a coherent, nationwide pattern. Hitler officially called for "the strictest and blindest discipline" and prohibited "isolated actions"

4. *CV-Zeitung*, February 2, 1933, 1.

5. Salomon Adler-Rudel, *Jüdische Selbsthilfe unter dem Nazi-Regime, 1933–1939 im Spiegel der Berichte der Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1974), 72.

6. *CV-Zeitung*, March 9, 1933, 1.

(*Einzelaktionen*) as an affront “against the national government.”⁷ Yet the state apparatus followed its own anti-Jewish agenda, especially on issues that had long been contentious like *shechitah* (German: *Schächten*). Hans Kronheim, a rabbi in Bielefeld in Westphalia, wrote to his fiancée about the first tangible changes he experienced after the Nazi takeover.⁸

DOCUMENT 1-3: Letter by Hans Kronheim, Bielefeld, to Senta Wallach, Hannover, March 21, 1933, USHMM Acc. 2008.292 box 3 (translated from German).

Dear Senta:

So that you get the news at once: I had barely finished getting ready this morning when the doorbell rang. It was the ritual butcher [*Schaucher, shochet*] Rosenblatt.⁹ I immediately suspected something bad: ritual slaughtering [*Schächten*] has been prohibited. The ban was applied as soon as he showed up yesterday at the abattoir. And today the paper has the official notification, in bold print, on the first page of the local news.¹⁰ Otherwise the little town is very quiet, except for the Goldbach [street in Bielefeld] showing its first swastika flag, diagonally across from me. I wonder what will come next! [. . .]

7. Radio speech by Hitler, March 12, 1933, quoted in *CV-Zeitung*, March 16, 1933, 1.

8. Hans Kronheim (1885–1958) served as a rabbi in Bielefeld, Westphalia, for over two decades until his emigration in 1938 to the United States with his wife, Senta (née Wallach), and two daughters (born 1934 and 1936). See *Year Book of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1960), 208; Monika Minninger, Joachim Meynert, and Friedhelm Schäffer, eds., *Antisemitisch Verfolgte registriert in Bielefeld, 1933–1945: Eine Dokumentation jüdischer Einzelschicksale* (Bielefeld: Kürbis, 1985), 119–20.

9. This may have been the *shochet* Hirsch Rosenblatt (1879–1942?). A Polish citizen, he and his wife, Frieda (née Schwarzbart), were deported out of Germany in late October 1938 with other Polish Jews. They were later sent to Auschwitz, where they perished. See Minninger, Meynert, and Schäffer, *Antisemitisch Verfolgte*, 183.

10. Since the early twentieth century, agitation against Jewish ritual slaughter had been appropriated by German antisemites as part of their agenda, often dressed up in the guise of animal protection. Already in 1926, the Bavarian diet had passed a law that outlawed ritual slaughter based on the vote of members from the Nazi, Communist, and Social Democratic parties, causing widespread protest by German Jewish organizations. After the Nazi takeover, prohibiting *shechitah* was one of the first measures enacted across Germany. See Avraham Barkai, “*Wehr Dich!*” *Der Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (C.V.), 1893–1938* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002), 193–94; Havi Ben-Sasson and Amos Goldberg, eds., *Years Wherein We Have Seen Evil: Selected Aspects in the History of Religious Jewry during the Holocaust*, vol. 1, *Orthodox Jewry in Germany under the Nazi Rule* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2003), 67–82.

As it turned out, the new regime did nothing to suppress anti-Jewish measures initiated by eager activists or bureaucrats. In fact, higher-level Nazi leaders used the evidence of local unrest to build up the pressure for more concerted policy, culminating eventually in the nationwide boycott on April 1, 1933. Foreign protests had little impact; indeed, as we will see, they could inflame rather than moderate tempers. And likewise, the protests of German Jews themselves remained largely ineffectual (though the very powerlessness of the Jews should have been evidence enough to disprove as pure fantasy the antisemitic claim that an organized Jewish conspiracy controlled world events).

DOCUMENT 1-4: Jewish war veterans march in protest against the Nazi persecution of German Jews, New York City, March 23, 1933, USHMPA WS# 11152.



Four thousand Jewish war veterans and other supporters protest against the Nazi regime's antisemitic platform and policies. Ten thousand spectators attended their march to New York's city hall on March 23, 1933. Printed with permission by the Jewish War Veterans of the USA.

Even at this early stage, the leaders of the large Jewish organizations faced a balancing act that in coming months and years would be increasingly difficult to