

American Press Reports on Kristallnacht

American newspapers across the country covered the Nazi assault on Jews in front-page, banner headlines, and articles about the events continued to appear for several weeks. No other story about the persecution of the Jews received such widespread and sustained attention from the American press at any other time during the Nazi era.

German censors sought to block images of Kristallnacht from reaching newspapers in the United States. However, *Life* magazine was able to publish some images in its November 28, 1938, issue.

Perhaps no headline so aptly summarized the danger for the Jews under the Nazi regime than that published on the front page of the Los Angeles Examiner on November 23, 1938: “Nazis Warn World Jews Will Be Wiped Out Unless Evacuated By Democracies.”

US President Denounces the Nazis

At his press conference on November 15, 1938, one week after Kristallnacht, President Franklin D. Roosevelt denounced Nazi Germany’s terror attack on Jews, saying, “I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth-century civilization.” FDR made an exception to his practice of off-the-record press conferences by allowing newspapers to quote this statement from his meeting with reporters that day.

The president also announced that he had recalled the US ambassador to Germany, Hugh Wilson. The United States was the only nation to recall its ambassador and would not replace him until after the end of the war in 1945.

In response to the news of Nazi terror against Jews, Americans protested in cities including New York and Los Angeles. Other Americans called for an increase in the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country.

Pressure on the US Immigration System

Despite the increasing threat faced by Jews living under Nazi rule in Germany and Austria, President Roosevelt knew that he would not be able to persuade Congress to reconsider immigration regulations. At the same November 15 press conference, a reporter asked the president if he would recommend relaxing the restrictions on immigration in order to admit the Jewish refugees from Europe. Roosevelt replied, “That is not in contemplation; we have the quota system.”

Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, whose department oversaw the Immigration and Naturalization Service, persuaded President Roosevelt to allow approximately 12,000 Germans, most of whom were Jews and already in the United States on visitor visas, to remain in the country indefinitely. Although he knew extending the visas could raise congressional objection, the president made his position clear. “I cannot,” he said, “in any decent humanity, throw them out.” Indeed, no Jews were forced to leave the United States to return to Nazi-occupied Europe for the duration of the war.

Some lawmakers who hoped to change the country’s restrictive immigration quota laws saw an opportunity in the wave of sympathy among Americans for refugees after Kristallnacht. On February 9, 1939, Senator Robert F. Wagner (D-NY) and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers (R-MA) introduced identical bills into Congress to offer refuge to 20,000 children under 14 from the Greater German Reich. Despite widespread support, the Wagner-Rogers Bill died in Congress. The quota system remained unchanged throughout the war and into the 1960s.

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