

NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS REMEMBERED:

HOW THE *NEW YORK TIMES* REPORTED KRISTALLNACHT IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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It is often said that news organizations write the first draft of history. However, news organizations are not just recording history and filing it away. They distribute this draft to the public, whose world perceptions are then molded based on those accounts, those initial drafts. Insofar as American newspapers are concerned—at least in the 1930s and 40s—the *New York Times* was the newspaper of record for not just New York, but also the entire United States. The way that organization did—or did not—cover current events shaped Americans’ understandings of those events, both as they were happening and as they would someday be remembered.

During those times, the *Times* was the ultimate purveyor of international going-on’s, which was important considering nearly the entire planet was involved in the second world war or soon would be. However, as the war raged the *Times* all but left out an important detail of the war: the Holocaust. When the *Times* did cover the events of the Holocaust, the events were either portrayed as a general—not Jewish—problem, or they were hidden on an inside page. The Holocaust, which had killed nearly 6 million Jews before it finally ended in September 1945, the *Times* hardly mentioned in comparison to the other wartime news, or at least did not mention in the same way by giving it front-page play with the day’s other most important articles. There has likely been no greater disservice done to the American public than the *Times*’ coverage, or more accurately its lack of coverage, of the Holocaust during and before World War II. On the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holocaust, the *Times* itself referred to its coverage as “surely the century’s bitterest

journalistic failure.”<sup>1</sup> As Jewish people in concentration or extermination camps were killed in droves, the *Times* chose to limit its coverage of the targeted group, based primarily on its Jewish publisher, Arthur Hays Sulzberger’s, ideologies. As Laurel Leff said in *Buried by the Times*, “If other publishers worried about appearing neutral with respect to Republicans or Democrats, business or labor, the Dodger or the Giants, Sulzberger worried about the Jews.”<sup>2</sup>

For this paper, I will focus on the *Times*’ coverage of a single event, Kristallnacht, which occurred two years before the war on November 9 and 10 in 1938. I will explore the ramifications of the *Times*’ coverage of Kristallnacht, demonstrating that its front-page coverage was uncommon for stories about Jewish people’s plight, and ultimately showing that greater significance should have been given to this incident and other Holocaust-related happenings, as well as why adequate coverage and play were not given.

### **The New York Times: storied reputation and reaction**

To understand why the *Times*’ coverage of Kristallnacht was so inappropriate for a publication like the *Times*, one must first understand the newspaper’s historical and societal influence and reputation. As Leff puts it, the *Times* was “the pinnacle of 1940s American journalism.”<sup>3</sup> In particular, people read the *Times* for its comprehensive international coverage. The *Times*, of course, boasted the best foreign correspondents, with 30 correspondents in Europe as World War II began.<sup>4</sup> It was the go-to source for war news

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<sup>1</sup> Max Frankel, "150th Anniversary: 1851-2001; Turning Away From the Holocaust." *New York Times*, November 14, 2001, Accessed October 30, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times*, (Cambridge University Press: 2005), 21

<sup>3-4</sup> Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 9

simply because it printed more of it than anyone, an average 125,000 words per issue.<sup>5</sup> That is impressive considering news space was limited to 1 million words an issue during the war.<sup>6</sup> War coverage took up 12.5 percent of a newspaper on average.

If the *Times* did not appropriately cover the Holocaust—and they did not—it was not because they did not know it was happening. They did know. The decision to not focus wartime coverage on the Holocaust came from Sulzberger, a practicing Jew, and it was decided for two basic reasons. The first, as a Jew during a time of rampant anti-Semitism, Sulzberger did not want readers to believe he unduly covered Jewish issues and causes. Anti-Semitism in the U.S. had been rising since 1920, peaking in the 1930s and during World War II, spurred on by stereotypes and myths that Jewish people manipulated the capitalist system, among other things. As Rafael Medoff says in *Blowing the Whistle on Genocide*, as explanation for the rise, “Although such theories as a whole were too extreme to gain general acceptance, parts of this mythology spread through American society...”<sup>7</sup> Sulzberger had a newspaper’s reputation to protect, and it was a highly esteemed reputation at that. He took great lengths to protect it from any perceived bias, even if that meant inadequately covering the Holocaust, and therefore displaying reverse bias.

The second reason for the *Times*’ little or buried coverage of the Holocaust is that Sulzberger felt covering the Holocaust and framing it as a Jewish issue—which he believed it was not and could not be because Jewishness was a religious faith, not an ethnic group—was inherently incorrect and would do more harm than good. That did not mean the *Times* would not cover the Holocaust. It just meant they would not treat that wartime incident

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<sup>6</sup> Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 168

<sup>7</sup> Rafael Medoff, *Blowing the Whistle on Genocide*, (Purdue University Press, 2009), 2 and 3

any differently than they would any other event. As Leff says, “The *Times* could, indeed should, report what was happening to the Jews, but it would not treat them different than other groups. There would be no special attention, no special sensitivity, no special pleading.”<sup>8</sup> However, the *Times* broke its own rule. It treated the Holocaust differently in that it did not treat it as significantly as it would a similarly influential and important war story. It overcompensated to ensure no one would perceive it as a Jewish paper. It did not do enough to cover the Holocaust.

Part of the problem was Sulzberger’s ideologies about what constitutes a Jewish person. Sulzberger believed Jewishness was solely religious. Adolf Hitler had different views. By 1935, Germany already had citizenship laws in place, which designated citizenship only to those with pure Aryan blood. The law states, “A citizen of the Reich is only that subject who is of German kindred blood and who, through his conduct, proves that he is both willing and able to faithfully serve the German people and Reich.”<sup>9</sup> Sulzberger’s ideologies were problematic because he was trying to treat Jewish people like everyone else, and Hitler was trying the opposite. To Hitler, Jews were a distinctive and special group, which he wanted gone, gone from Germany and eventually gone from the world. The two men had entirely different viewpoints, neither of which, under those circumstances, helped the European Jewry. By fighting for his ideologies, Sulzberger ultimately did both the Jewish people and Americans a disservice.

### **Kristallnacht and the stories that defined it**

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<sup>8</sup> Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 22

<sup>9</sup> “Reich Citizenship Law,” *In Third Reich Sourcebook*, eds. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), Kindle location 7261

Kristallnacht, sometimes called the night of broken glass, took place on November 9 and 10, 1938, in protest against the assassination of the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath by a Jew named Herschel Feibel Grynspan. According to a report from the time of the protests, members of the Nazi regime rioted in the streets, breaking out the glass from Jewish-owned businesses and burning down apartments and synagogues.<sup>10</sup> In comparison to other Holocaust-related events, the *Times* devoted a fair amount of coverage to this incident, running at least two stories a day on the front page for at least five days after it happened. Despite this adequate placement, the *Times*' Kristallnacht coverage still falls victim to certain *Times* conventions for covering Jew-related World War II stories, such as shifted framing and uninspired headlines.

The *Times*' first story on Kristallnacht appeared on its second and final night, November 10, 1938. The story summed up the events of the first night's raids. The story ran in a one-column rail on the left side of the paper, third in line based on newspaper page hierarchy, an appropriate position based on its subject matter. Titled "Berlin Raids Reply to Death of Envoy," the story begins clumsily, backing into the heart of the issue, which is summarized in the deck underneath: "Nazis Loot Jews' Shops, Burn City's Biggest Synagogue to Avenge Paris Embassy Aid."<sup>11</sup> Even in the headline Sulzberger's bias shines through, even if he was not directly responsible for what it said. As per Sulzberger's request, articles were framed with as little emphasis on their Jewish roots, even if Jewishness was the article's main issue. This story's headline puts the emphasis on who is

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<sup>10</sup> "Secret Report of the Security Service of the Reichsfuhrer SS," and "Report on Kristallnacht" *In Third Reich Sourcebook*, eds. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), Kindle location 8016 and 8039

<sup>11</sup> "Berlins Raids Reply to Death of Envoy." *The New York Times*, November 10, 1938. Accessed October 31, 2014.

committing the raids (Germans) over whom and what was raided (Jews and their property).

Despite the problems with the headline, the story fairly portrays the incident, even going as far as to speculate that Nazi guards may have known about the seemingly spontaneously raids in advance. “The vandalism began in the downtown shopping district on the Leipzigerstrasse and Friedrichstrasse soon after 2 A.M. As if possessing a ‘premonition’ that something might happen, groups of uniformed Elite Guards were gathered at the corner of those two streets when demonstrators arrived,” the article read.<sup>12</sup>

The next day, November 11, 1938, the placement and sheer amount of coverage of Kristllnacht is even more appropriate. On this day, the *Times* ran two front-page stories on Kristallnacht, one about the fate of Vienna’s synagogues and another about the unprecedented looting of Jewish owned shops and offices.<sup>13</sup> In the way the November 10 story failed, these two stories do not. The headlines accurately portray the news, and the stories are framed around the Jewish experience. The looting story’s headline even uses rhetoric that implies that the events were orchestrated by the Nazi regime, noting that as rioters were burning Jewish-owned businesses and common places to the ground, “police stood idle.”<sup>14</sup>

On the third day of stories about Kristallnacht, there is a marked change in the *Times’* tone and focus. In the two stories packaged together as the dominant story on the right side of the paper under the combined headline “Nazis Warn Foreign Press ‘Lies’ will

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<sup>12</sup> “Berlin Raids Reply to Death of Envoy,” *New York Times*

<sup>13</sup> “Nazis Smash, Loot and Burn Jewish Shops and Temples Until Goebbels Calls Halt” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1938. Accessed on December 1, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> “Bands Roves Cities” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1938. Accessed on December 1, 2014.

Hurt Reich Jews; Arrests Run to Thousands,” the Jewish situation is now represented by those who perpetuated the riots and lootings and reactions by Americans. In the American perspective story, which featured prominently district attorney Thomas E. Dewey’s and former governor Alfred E. Smith’s comments on Kristallnacht. In the story Smith is quoted saying Kristallnacht “was not merely a Jewish question, a Catholic question, a Protestant question, a political questions or a labor question, but one which goes to the very foundation on which we have erected America and on which we have stood all during our political life to preserve civilization.”<sup>15</sup> From the article, it is clear that Smith feels similarly to how Sulzberger feels about the events leading up to the Holocaust, though neither man would have been calling it the Holocaust at the time. Both Smith and Sulzberger would rather focus on what they see as the bigger issue with the Holocaust, even though Kristallnacht was so obviously a Jewish-centered event.

On the fourth day, the coverage leans even farther away from the Jewish issue. While the stories are given the same dominant, right-side treatment they were given in the previous days, the larger story of the day is about how the events of Kristallnacht affected the Catholic population, not the Jewish population. The smaller story in the package focused on the Nazi party’s determination to liquidate Jews in Germany, a seemingly more important story than the one directly to its left, although page hierarchy suggests it is less important. Additionally, the two stories seem to contradict each other. Whereas the Catholic-focused story begins, “The wave of anti-Semitic lawlessness here has now been supplanted by a campaign of violence against the Catholic Church,” effectively saying that

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<sup>15</sup> “Dewey and Smith Lead Protests Here Against Anti-Semitic Riots in Reich” *The New York Times*, November 12, 1938. Accessed on December 1, 2014.



the Jewish bent of the original lootings has been completely erased by Catholic-focused violence. However, a quick glance to the right of the story confirms that the situation for Jewish people in Germany is becoming increasingly dangerous and concerning.

The story reports that after the events of Kristallnacht, owners would have to pay for the damages caused by looters. Although the story does not explicitly say—likely because of Sulzberger’s policies—the owners in question were Jewish. This is yet another example of the *Times*’ unwillingness to report the issue as it was: a Jewish issue. As well, the important news about new decrees that further limit the property and citizenships rights of Jewish people in Germany is buried underneath what appears to be a summary of the adjacent Catholic-focused story and reporting on the various reactions to the decrees and the events of Kristallnacht before the story even mentions what exactly the new decrees stated. However, once the story begins to mention the decrees, the reportorial voice was appropriate, sometimes even more scathing than is acceptable by current journalism conventions. For instance, at one point the story describes the decrees by saying they “can no longer be measured by standards of Western bourgeois civilization,” implying the Germans acted barbarically.<sup>16</sup>

On the fifth day of coverage the *Times* focuses on German reactions to the event, showing that many Berliners were “shocked by anti-Jewish actions.”<sup>17</sup> The story is paired with another describing the Nazi party’s quick ascension into political influence and control. The story says the Nazi party “is proceeding at an accelerating pace and has gradually shaken off the influence of what are designated abroad as ‘moderates,’ and in

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<sup>16</sup> “Arrests Continue” *The New York Times*, November 13, 1938. Accessed on December 1, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> “Many Berliners Shocked by Anti-Jewish Actions” *The New York Times*, November 14, 1938. Accessed on December 1, 2014.

both foreign and domestic affairs the ‘activists’ are now in unchallenged control.”<sup>18</sup> These two stories are packaged together in the dominant position on the right side of the paper similarly to the past several days of stories.

### **Impression of the *Times*’ Kristallnacht coverage**

The most unsettling thing about the *Times*’ coverage of Kristallnacht is that it seemingly covered every perspective on the event except for the perspective from the group of people the events targeted: the Jews. Reporters covered the logistics of the event: how many shops were burned, how many Jews were arrested. They covered Germans’ reactions to the raids and the effects on Catholics in the area, but they never voiced the concerns of the Jewish people—at least they did not do it on page one. They left readers to infer how the Jewish people were faring from the logistical coverage, but readers never heard from them directly.

One of the reasons journalism is particularly influential and important in people’s lives is because of its ability to tell stories from individuals who cannot tell it themselves, and with whom some readers may never come in contact. In showing the reader a different side of life, the coverage engenders a sense of empathy for the other people in certain situations. Facts and figures are one thing; a heart-wrenching emotional account is another. Readers in this instance did not get a chance to empathize with the Jewish people in Germany. They only read the hard figures associated with their liquidation from the country, likely forever molding those people’s perception of Kristallnacht in this instance, the entire Holocaust if you take the coverage as representative of the whole. After the *Times* moved on from its Kristallnacht coverage, it did not give another Jewish-centered story the

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<sup>18</sup> Otto Tolishus, “Threats to Further Steps,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 1938. Accessed on December 1, 2014.

same front-page play until the War Refugee Board gave its official statement regarding the extent of killing at the Auschwitz and Burkenau concentration camps in November 1944, six years after Kristallnacht.<sup>19</sup>

A large part of the reason the *Times* so appropriately and accurately covered the events of Kristallnacht is because it had no choice but to cover it well. While some events were easily hidden on inside pages, Kristallnacht caught the attention of the entire world for the sheer breadth and severity of the vengeance against the Jewish people. It got people talking, both from inside and outside Germany. The Nazi regime admits this. A November 1938 report on the populace's response to Kristallnacht states the following: "The brutal measures taken against the Jews have elicited outrage in the populace. People are rather open about it, and many Aryans have been arrested as a result."<sup>20</sup> While that quote only refers to the German populace, based on the *Times*' coverage, it seems the event was a topic of international conversation. Other stories, which elicited less international outrage, were not covered so well. For instance, a December 11, 1938, article headlined "25 'Traitors' Sentenced" received minimal play on page 54, dwarfed by other international stories and the adjacent full page shoe advertisement on the next page.<sup>21</sup> This is troubling because this story received that kind of unimpressive play despite so obviously—at least in retrospect, but likely during its time too—alluding to the coming atrocities of the Holocaust. This was the case for many stories; the *Times* either hid the story or reframed it to focus on a

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<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Baron, "The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945-1960," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17 (2003), 3

<sup>20</sup> Sopade, "Reaction of the Populace to Reichskristallnacht," in the *Third Reich Sourcebook*, eds. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), Kindle location: 8112

<sup>21</sup> "25 'traitors' Sentenced." *The New York Times*, December 11, 1938. Accessed December 11, 2014.

perceived general and not Jewish problem. However, Kristallnacht was very obviously a Jewish-centric incident. German officials specifically said so. A set of instruction delivered to German police specifically asks them to not intervene in actions taken against “Places of business and apartments belong to Jews.”<sup>22</sup>

### **How could the *Times* do this?**

As aforementioned, Sulzberger believed Jews were a religion, not a race. This basic belief and his fear of perceived bias tarnishing the *Times*' reputation influenced the way the *Times* covered events both before and during the Holocaust. However, those were not the only factors at play. The first factor is that Sulzberger was not the only person making content decisions at the time. Sure, he believed the stories should be covered a certain way, but an entire bullpen of editors carried out the decision day after day, perhaps never personally consulting Sulzberger themselves and perhaps too carefully treading the line Sulzberger had drawn, which designated the extent to which they should cover Jewish-related events of the war. As Leff says, “Night after night, story after story, no matter the course of the war, the bullpen decided throughout 1943 that news about what was happening to the Jews should go inside the paper.”<sup>23</sup> Leff goes on to make the case that although the editors never came forward with their reasoning for running the stories as they did, they did not need to. The two thousand wartime editions of the *Times* spoke for them.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Reinhard Heydrich, “Instruction for Kristallnacht,” in the *Third Reich Sourcebook*, eds. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), Kindle location: 7970

<sup>23</sup> Leff, *Buried by The Times*, 171

<sup>24</sup> Leff, *Buried by The Time* , 176

Another factor was simply American's lack of interest in those events. Despite, as Antero Holmila says in *Reporting the Holocaust in the British, Swedish and Finnish Press, 1945-50*, the Holocaust being a "media event," Americans did not seem to want to follow the events closely.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, "in the West, the beginnings of the war meant less—not more—attention paid to Jews,"<sup>26</sup> and for a number of reasons. First, the Holocaust was not an appealing news event. Novick hypothesizes that people want to read about scandal and outrage, even in the 30s and 40s. These people preferred to read stories of "vice where [they] expect virtue."<sup>27</sup> Essentially, people did not want to read stories that reminded them that bad people perform bad deeds. As well, Americans just did not perceive Germany as the biggest threat in the war, instead focusing their attention on Japan after Pearl Harbor.<sup>28</sup> As well, the *Times* was not the only newspaper to under-report the Holocaust. European newspapers did not do much better, and they were housed on the same continent as the concentration camps, as Holmila infers in *Reporting the Holocaust in the British, Swedish and Finnish Press, 1945-50*.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion on the *Times*' Kristllnacht coverage**

It is true that no matter what editorial decisions journalists make, someone will likely have a problem. Today, many criticize news organizations for covering celebrity gossip more vigorously than important political issues. Although that argument is tired, for instance, one cannot only cover 'important' news, the *Times* certainly made some questionable content placement decisions when it came to covering what would one day be

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<sup>25</sup> Antero Holmila, *Reporting the Holocaust in the British, Swedish and Finnish Press, 1945-50* (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1

<sup>26</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 200)

<sup>27</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*

<sup>28</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*

<sup>29</sup> Holmila, *Reporting the Holocaust in the British, Swedish and Finnish Press, 1945-50*, 25

called the Holocaust. These decisions were made primarily because of its publisher, Sulzberger's, ideologies about Jewishness. In a memoir by Arthur Gelb, who started as a copyboy at the *Times* and eventually became managing editor, Gelb remembered an instance where the *Times* showed particularly terrible news judgment. In this example, the *Times* broke the news of American troops freeing inmates at Buchenwald as part of a three paragraph aggregated news brief. The news ran among such esteemed company as "War Dog Honored Here," on page eleven.<sup>30</sup>

Sulzberger's policies were not the only factors that prevented the *Times* from covering the Holocaust. American's attitudes toward the event also shaped coverage and placement in relation to other wartime content. However, that is not to say the *Times* could not have stressed the importance of the events leading to and throughout the Holocaust and effectively force people to take note of and react to the Holocaust through front page placement of stories.

While one cannot be too sure how the events of World War II would have played out had the *Times* given better and more appropriate coverage to the atrocities of the Holocaust, the way the newspaper covered Kristallnacht and other events certainly shaped American's perception of the Holocaust, likely for the worst. The *Times* masthead reads, "all the news that fits to print," and if the *Times* does not publish a story, readers could reasonably assume it was not important news; otherwise the newspaper would obviously have it. In some cases, while the *Times* certainly did print news about the Holocaust, the coverage was buried. In doing so, the *Times* effectively told its audience that the plight of millions of European Jews was not need-to-know. If people wanted to know about it, they

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<sup>30</sup> Arthur Gelb, *City Room*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2003, 79

could dig through the newspaper. If they were not so ambitious, they would never see it. The book “Buried by the Times” is aptly named in two respects: literally because the news of the Holocaust was buried on inside pages and also because a huge portion of the European Jewish population were buried as the *Times* sat idly by, essentially silent on the subject.

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