When the popular fury (Volkszorn) erupts -

A commemoration of the night of 9 to 10 November

by Andreas Zick

For most people in this country, 9 November is a perfectly ordinary day. A Monday, an everyday day with a normal evening. In some towns, St Martin's Day parades get underway, fueled by the hope that children will learn compassion. Elsewhere, concerts and events are taking place. On TV, programmes range from entertainment to news. Something is reassuring about normality, especially when it gets dark and cold. One doesn't want to disrupt it or question it, as long as it doesn't get in the way.

For what is most likely a shrinking number of people, 9 November is a day unlike any other, particularly in the late afternoon and evening. These people include Jewish men and women, their acquaintances, relatives, friends and neighbors, as well as others who reflect on the so-called "Reichspogromnacht" and gather to commemorate it. [1] On 9 November 1938, the leadership of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) in Munich called for 'acts of popular anger' against the Jewish population.[2] During the night of 9 to 10 November, over 1,400 synagogues, prayer halls and meeting rooms were vandalized or burnt down; approximately 7,500 Jewish shops, businesses and homes were demolished, looted or destroyed; according to estimates, up to 2,000 people were killed, and approximately 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and deported to concentration camps. These are scientifically reliable figures, but the number of other victims, injuries, and damage was much higher and was never known, because it was not properly investigated or because it is difficult to arrive at an accurate assessment. Some perpetrators were identified. There were many who were never identified. On this night, there were bystanders, those who knew what was happening, direct or covert supporters, those who were either oblivious to or interested in the violence, as well as those who were not interested in any of it and who spent a normal evening and a peaceful night, finding everything to be as it should be. The one night that is remembered was followed by a wave of violence, which in turn triggered the next – just as it was intended to. It was one night followed by many others, and a reality of violence that was characterized by days and nights right up until the end of Nazi rule; without a single interruption. Between 9 November 1938 and 8 May 1945, the unconditional surrender of the Wehrmacht, there were 2,372 days and

[1] The term Reichspogromnacht is controversial, particularly as it is not reminiscent of 'the Reich' but of anti-Semitic violence.

[2] https://www.jmberlin.de/thema-9-november-1938

nights alone; before that lay days and nights, and after that followed days and nights of violence. Acts of violence are intended to trigger and fuel waves of violence. That night of violence set the tone. It was meant to be the first of many. And Hitler was in power, wielding boundless power following his meteoric rise. In the 1928 Reichstag elections, the NSDAP achieved 2.6 per cent; in 1930, 18.3 per cent; in the last free election in November 1932, 33.1 per cent; in March 1933, 43.9 per cent; and seven months before Kristallnacht, the NSDAP received 99.1 per cent of the vote.

On 11 November 1938, the Dresden daily newspaper reported: "The people's outrage is finding an outlet." [3] The popular anger that had been called for erupted. The term 'popular fury' (Volkszorn) points to what was at stake. It was not about personal, individual anger, but about the annoyance, the rage, the outrage that are inherent to the German people and to which they are entitled, thanks to those in power. "Volkszorn" is a term that is not easily defined in technical terms, but it describes what is at stake: the so-called 'people' are transformed, through a self-constructed racial theory, into the ultimate group, into a 'we', into a community whose existence is sustained solely by its demarcation from the 'inferior'. Goebbels, the Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, called for popular anger and set his nationwide propaganda machine in motion. It instilled the fantasy of omnipotence and an inflated national identity amongst the people. Anger is a driving force. This emotion, this fury, unites people whilst simultaneously suggesting power and strength. Anyone who does not follow the anger is threatened. Many will have joined in the anger out of fear of not belonging. Inciting the people to anger is a method of authoritarian and tyrannical regimes, but it is also embraced. The people fall in line. Amidst the rage and the lust for violence, a sense of community grows, along with the feeling that anything is possible. This must be followed by images of violence, images of destruction and, above all, of the wounds and the victims who have been killed. The people's anger is the emotion intended to lead directly to action; a factor in radicalization, as we might perhaps describe it scientifically today.

The night of 9 to 10 November 1938 serves, amongst other things, as a reminder of just how devastating and powerful popular anger can be. According to empirical research into collective action and protest, it builds up slowly.[4] It is fueled by emotions and by propaganda centered on deprivation and injustice, which are channeled into a new group identity ('WE', the people), imbued with moral convictions and the belief in the group's power to act against its enemies. Public anger manifests itself in hatred, rage, annoyance and many other shared feelings and emotions. This anger unites people; it erupts on the streets, in the digital online world, in everyday life, as well as in the debates and disputes within parliaments. It is intended to be contagious and to bring people together. 'The people are rising up', 'we will hunt them down',

[3] https://blog.slub-dresden.de/beitrag/2018/11/09/zum-gedenken-an-den-80-jahrestag-der-novemberpogrome
[4] c.f., Ng, S. H., & Platow, M. J. (2024). The violent turn in non-violent collective action: What happens? *Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 27*(3), 303–317

‘Down with…’, ‘a disgrace’ – there are many examples from recent history that express and convey this anger, whilst also seeking to stoke it.

Fury and anger instil fear even when it does not directly lead to violence. It looms large. Jewish people who find the night of 9 to 10 November a difficult time of remembrance know exactly what is meant. Perhaps this makes it all the more urgent to take the warning signs in attitudes, images and symbols more seriously, not to play them down, and to work together to understand them better. In my view, there are currently many such warning signs of popular anger. In our latest Mitte study from the summer of 2025, 6 per cent of a representative sample of German citizens agreed with the statement: ‘Without the extermination of the Jews, Hitler would be regarded today as a great statesman’; a further 9 per cent felt this was ‘partly true, partly not’. Fewer (5 per cent) said: ‘The crimes of National Socialism have been greatly exaggerated in historical accounts’, but here the proportion of ‘partly true, partly false’ responses is higher, at 14.5 per cent. And 7 per cent agreed with the statement: ‘National Socialism also had its good sides’. Almost one in five respondents said this was ‘partly true, partly false’.

Today, Jews are feeling the full force of public anger coming from all directions. 7 October 2023 transformed anger ‘towards Israel’ into a new wave of hatred and violence, further increasing the number of anti-Semitic offences, which had already been on the rise due to right-wing extremism. At the same time, according to our analyses, there has been a rise in national chauvinism, fueled by the notion of the ‘people’ and open to anti-Semitic, misanthropic and other far-right ideas. Both here in this country and around the world, ideas of a unified and homogeneous ‘people’ are back in vogue, and they obscure what history should teach us: their link to violence against those whom the elites declare not to belong to the ‘people’. ‘Foreign to the people’ (“volksfremd”) is also a term that persists and keeps recurring.

The 9th of November is a quiet evening of remembrance in honor of the victims. In strong democracies, this remembrance sends an important message to everyone, particularly to the majority of society, which wields influence. It serves as a warning against violence and the danger of succumbing to national chauvinism, which, 88 years ago, wiped out people, religions, cultures and democracy. There is much to commemorate, and that is why a quiet commemoration is appropriate. In the silence, there is space for everyone to reflect on their own thoughts, together with others and within the protection of those paying their respects. There are many opportunities to commemorate and remember beyond 9 November. In democracies, no one is forced to commemorate, but everyone is called upon to remember and, hopefully, empowered to do so through appropriate education.

In Germany, there was a guiding principle in light of the history of extermination under National Socialism. ‘Never again’ was the vow made by the survivors of Buchenwald

concentration camp on 19 April 1945. It was directed against fascism and in favor of peace. ‘Never again popular fury’ would be one way of learning lessons from the past for the future, to pave the way more easily for hope rather than despair.

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