Alan E. Steinweis, “Kristallnacht 1938”

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Abstract
One of the most fundamental—and vexing—questions in all of modern history is whether cultures make governments or governments make cultures. Tocqueville, who was right about almost everything, thought the former: he said that American culture made American government democratic. Neocon theorists, who have been wrong about most things, believe the opposite: that democratic governments can make cultures democratic. Under this theory, we should be able to impose liberal democracy on, say, Iraq or Afghanistan, and thereby make their cultures liberal democratic.

The culture-government question is also central to modern German historiography. It usually takes this form: did German culture produce the Nazis or did Nazis produce German (or rather “Nazi”) culture. In his eye-opening book Kristallnacht 1938 (Harvard, 2009), Alan Steinweis succeeds in shedding new light on this subject by carefully studying an old topic—the Nazi pogrom against the Jews in 1938, aka, “Kristallnacht.” He shows that it is difficult to argue that the Nazis alone prosecuted the attack. It would be much more reasonable to say that they “provoked” it or, even better, “unleashed” it. Steinweis points out that what might be called “spontaneous” (or at least not party-directed) assaults on Jews had been occurring with some frequency over the years preceding the Kristallnacht. The Nazis my have facilitated these spasms, but they did not create the paranoia that drove them—that, it seems, was an element of German culture.

Importantly, the Nazi leaders—and above all Hitler and Goebbels—knew that all they needed to do was give the word and the anti-Semitic pressure building up within the German public would be released. In November 1936, Herschel Grynszpan’s assassination of a low-level German diplomat gave them the pretext they needed to give that word. They did, and the floodgates of Judophobia opened.

The Nazis didn’t create violent German anti-Semitism; they reflected it and took advantage of it. As H.L. Menchen might have said, the Germans got the government they wanted and deserved to get it good and hard.

Keywords
20th Century, Anti-Semitism, Ashkenazi Jews, Assassination, Atrocities, Crimes against Humanity, Ethnic Cleansing, Fascism, Genocide, Germany, Hitler, Jews, Nazis, Propaganda, World War II

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