

Jewish Reactions to “The New Situation” (February 2, 1933)

Abstract

After Adolf Hitler’s appointment, Germany’s Jews were nervous about what the new chancellor’s success meant for their place in German society. The NSDAP’s antisemitic views and policies were clearly stated in the 1920 party platform and, time and again, in speeches delivered by leading Nazi party members. To most scholars, these principles did not yet point to a genocidal and annihilationist worldview. As this article shows, many in the Jewish community felt that Hitler’s extreme policies and racial prejudice could be constrained by the standard-bearer conservatives in his new cabinet and the legislative power of the Reichstag. The hope was that the desire to re-establish Germany as a European power would force Hitler to tone down his antisemitism to avoid criticism from the Western powers. This wish, of course, went unrealized, and the major powers did little to shun the Reich for its antisemitic policies between 1933 and 1939.

Source

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* newspapers^[1]; 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 Wilhelmstrasse^[2] 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.

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.

NOTES

[1] *Der Angriff* and *Völkischer Beobachter* were Nazi Party newspapers. [Footnote included in Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume I: 1933–1938*, p. 8.]

[2] This was the site of major government agencies in Berlin. [Footnote included in Matthäus and Roseman, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume I: 1933–1938*, p. 8.]

Source of English translation: “The New Situation,” in Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume I: 1933–1938* (Documenting Life and Destruction: Holocaust Sources in Context). Published by AltaMira Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010. Used with permission of Rowman & Littlefield, from *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume I: 1933–1938* (Documenting Life and Destruction: Holocaust Sources in Context). Permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., pp. 8–9.

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