

Extracts from the UK House of Commons Debates

Source: Hansard, Racial, Religious and Political Minorities, HC Deb 21 November 1938 vol 341 cc1428-83.

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On 21 November 1938, the UK House of Commons debated whether Britain would accept more Jewish refugees from Germany, following the violence of the November Pogrom on 9-10 November 1938 (*Kristallnacht*). The following are extracts from two key speeches by Members of Parliament (MPs) during this debate.

The first extracts are from the speech by Mr Philip Noel-Baker (MP for Derby), who argued in favour of alleviating the suffering of Jews and others who were being persecuted by Nazi Germany. His speech included reports of the violence and destruction that took place during the November Pogrom.

Mr Philip Noel-Baker:

I beg to move, "That this House notes with profound concern the deplorable treatment suffered by certain racial, religious and political minorities in Europe, and, in view of the growing gravity of the refugee problem would welcome an immediate concerted effort amongst the nations, including the United States of America, to secure a common policy."

[...]

Here is the "Daily Telegraph's" first summary of what occurred: "The entire Jewish population of Germany was subjected yesterday to a reign of terror. The pogroms started simultaneously all over Germany. No attempt was made by the police to restrain the savagery of the mob. Almost every synagogue in the country was burnt to the ground. Scarcely a Jewish shop escaped being wrecked. Looting occurred on a great scale. Parts of the fashionable district of Berlin were reduced to a shambles. Jews of all ages, of both sexes, were beaten in the streets and in their homes. Numbers were lynched. The caretaker of a synagogue is believed to have been burnt, with his family, to death."

[...]

British journalists are unanimous in their testimony that the attacks were not spontaneous, but, as the "Times" said, all the indications point to centralised direction. Everywhere the police allowed them to go on.

[...]

If these acts had been the spontaneous excesses of the mob, the Government might have been expected to condemn them, to punish the offenders and make reparation to the victims. That was not what happened. Millions of pounds worth of damage has been done, and the [Nazi] Government proceeded to complete the work by decrees which ordered the Jews to pay a collective fine of £84,000,000 and to repair the damage done to their business premises at their own expense. That was accompanied by an order to the insurance companies not to pay them what was due.

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By another order it was decreed that after 1st January no Jew may take part in any economic activity of any kind. In the meantime, they are not allowed to open their own shops nor even to go to the shops of Aryans.¹

The next extracts are from the speech by the Secretary of State for the Home Department, Sir Samuel Hoare, which confirmed the government's response to the November Pogrom.

Sir Samuel Hoare:

Let me begin by reminding the House of some of the difficulties. In this country we are a thickly populated industrial community with at the present moment a very large number of unemployed. Competition is very keen with foreign countries, and it is difficult for many of our fellow-countrymen to make a livelihood at all and keep their industries and businesses going. It is quite obvious that there is an underlying current of suspicion and anxiety, rightly or wrongly, about alien immigration on any big scale. It is a fact, and we had better face the fact quite frankly, that below the surface—I know it from my own daily experience at the Home Office —

[...]

I know it from my own experience that there is the making of a definite anti-Jewish movement.² [...] I have to be careful to avoid anything in the nature of mass immigration which, in my view, would inevitably lead to the growth of a movement which we all wish to see suppressed.³ That means that we must keep a check upon individual cases of immigrants.

[...]

¹ Hansard, *Racial, Religious and Political Minorities*, HC Deb 21 November 1938 vol 341 cc1428-30 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1938/nov/21/racial-religious-and-political-minorities#column_1428> [accessed 21 May 2022].

² Samuel Hoare is likely to have been referring here to support in Britain for the British Union of Fascists (BUF). The BUF were a pro-Nazi, fascist, antisemitic political party founded in 1932 by Oswald Mosley. At their peak in the mid-1930s they had a membership of 40,000 people. The BUF's popularity declined following a number of violent clashes with police in 1936 (notably at the Battle of Cable Street in London), before the organisation was officially banned in 1940. Source: The Wiener Holocaust Library, *10 Points of Fascist Policy: Fascism Explained* <<https://wienerholocaustlibrary.org/object/01373/>> [accessed 21 May 2022].

³ By early 1938, there were only about 10,000 Jewish refugees in Britain. In a later part of Samuel Hoare's speech, he said, "the information at my disposal goes to show that [these Jewish refugees] have been instrumental in employing 15,000 British workmen in the industries which they have set up, without, so far as I can gather, any damage to British employment or to British labour", c1469.

Handout 1

Activity 7: Britain and the Legacy of Loss - Part 1

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We try at the Home Office to work in the closest co-operation with the various organisations that are directly engaged on the refugee problem. We have, for instance, the invaluable assistance of what is called the Co-ordinating Committee, a committee upon which are represented the principal Jewish organisations, the Quakers, and organisations of the Christian Churches.

[...]

I think there will be children with whom we could deal in large numbers, provided they were sponsored by responsible bodies and responsible individuals.

[...]

The Co-ordinating Committee and the other organisations told me that they would be prepared to bring over here all the children whose maintenance could be guaranteed, either by their funds or by generous individuals, and that all that will probably be necessary will be for the Home Office to give the necessary visas and to facilitate their entry into this country. I told Lord Samuel, without a moment's hesitation, that the Home Office would certainly be prepared to provide facilities of that kind, and I venture to-night to take the opportunity of commending this effort to my fellow countrymen in general.⁴

⁴Hansard, *Racial, Religious and Political Minorities*, HC Deb 21 November 1938 vol 341 cc1468-74 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1938/nov/21/racial-religious-and-political-minorities#column_1428> [accessed 21 May 2022].