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Sayantani Jana, University of Southern California

Mass Violence and Silenced Memory: A Comparative Study of the 1938 November Pogrom in Berlin and the 1946 Calcutta Riots

This paper is part of my dissertation project which is a comparative micro-historical study of two incidents of mass violence that are geographically and culturally removed from each other yet share certain similarities.

The Kristallnacht took place from 9-10 November 1938 and was a nationwide pogrom orchestrated by the Nazi leadership. In Berlin, SA, SS, Hitler Youth, as well as sections of the public destroyed Jewish homes, synagogues and businesses, while also murdering an unknown number of Jews. The Calcutta Riots was a 5-day period of extreme violence that left stores, temples and homes destroyed, some 5000 people dead and over 100,000 people displaced. Although popularly termed a riot, historical evidence suggests a certain degree of pre-meditation and instigation of violence on the part of the Muslim League Provincial Government in Bengal at the time.

Despite the abundance of scholarly works on both the Holocaust and the Indian Partition, it is surprising that there exists very little research on these violent events in Berlin and Calcutta, especially considering the centrality of these cities to the socio-political landscapes of their time. While Berlin was the capital and housed the largest Jewish population in Nazi Germany, Calcutta was the capital city of Bengal, with a majority Hindu population and a substantial Muslim minority, and had been one of the earliest seats of anti-colonial, nationalist uprisings.

Based on news reports, police records, administrative records, oral histories of the USC Shoah Foundation and the 1947 Partition Archive, as well as personal interviews conducted with partition survivors, my paper will thus attempt to recuperate the silenced memory of these events, while also exploring comparative questions of violent nationalism, forced displacement of certain populations and the role of the urban landscape in a pogrom/riot. The comparative framework will help advance a discussion of the terminologies of “pogrom” and “riot” as they have been shaped by social and cultural understandings of violence in Western and non-Western societies.