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KRISTALLNACHT

On November 9–10, 1938, Nazi leaders unleashed a series of pogroms against the Jewish population in Germany and recently incorporated territories. This event came to be called *Kristallnacht* (The Night of Broken Glass) because of the shattered glass that littered the streets after the vandalism and destruction of Jewish-owned businesses, synagogues, and homes.

KEY FACTS

1

Nazi officials disguised the organized nature of the pogroms. They described the actions as justifiable and spontaneous responses of the German population to the assassination of a German diplomatic official, Ernst vom Rath, in Paris. This unprecedented violence against the Reich's Jews generated international outrage.


2

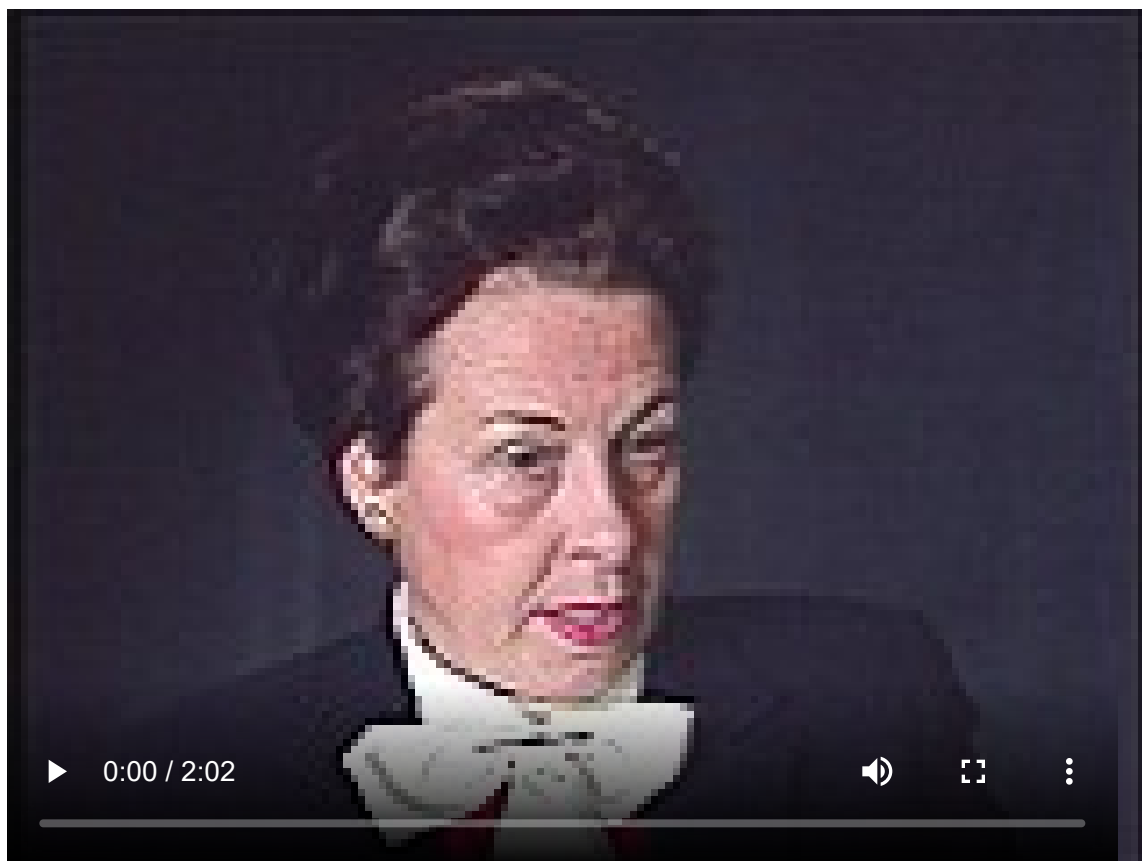
During the pogrom, **i** some 30,000 Jewish males were rounded up and taken to concentration camps. This was the first time Nazi officials made massive arrests of Jews specifically because they were Jews, without any further cause for arrest.

3

In the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*, the Nazi regime ordered the Jewish community to pay a 1 billion Reichsmark "atonement tax" and rapidly enacted many anti-Jewish laws and edicts.

A Nationwide Pogrom

Kristallnacht, literally, "Night of Crystal," is often referred to as the "Night of Broken Glass." The name refers to the wave of violent anti-Jewish pogroms which took place on November 9 and 10, 1938. This wave of violence took place throughout Germany, annexed Austria, and in areas of the Sudetenland  in Czechoslovakia recently occupied by German troops.



Johanna Gerechter Neumann describes Kristallnacht in Hamburg

Amid intensifying anti-Jewish measures and the 1938 Kristallnacht ("Night of Broken Glass") pogrom, Johanna's family decided to leave Germany. They obtained visas for Albania, crossed into Italy, and sailed in 1939. They remained in Albania under the Italian occupation and, after Italy surrendered in 1943, under German occupation. The family was liberated after a battle between the Germans and Albanian partisans in December 1944.

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Origin of the Name "Kristallnacht"

Kristallnacht owes its name to the shards of shattered glass that lined German streets in the wake of the pogrom—broken glass from the windows of synagogues, homes, and Jewish-owned businesses plundered and destroyed

during the violence.

Assassination of Ernst vom Rath

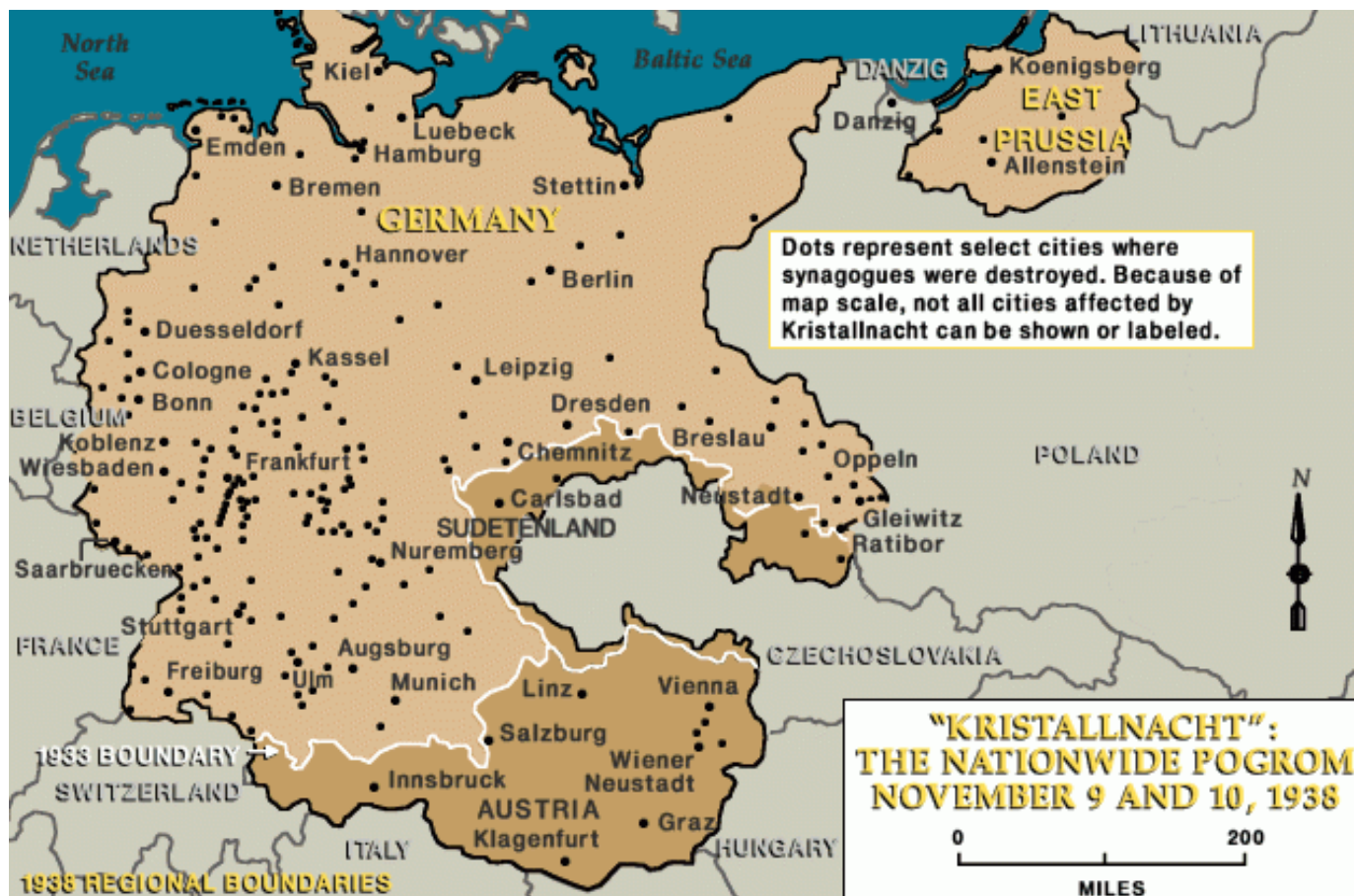
The violence was instigated primarily by Nazi Party officials and members of the SA (*Sturmabteilungen*: commonly known as Storm Troopers) and Hitler Youth.

In its aftermath, German officials announced that *Kristallnacht* had erupted as a spontaneous outburst of public sentiment in response to the assassination of Ernst vom Rath. Vom Rath was a German embassy official stationed in Paris. Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Polish Jew, had shot the diplomat on November 7, 1938. A few days earlier, German authorities had expelled thousands of Jews of Polish citizenship living in Germany from the Reich; Grynszpan had received news that his parents, residents in Germany since 1911, were among them.

Grynszpan's parents and the other expelled Polish Jews were initially denied entry into their native Poland. They found themselves stranded in a refugee camp near the town of Zbaszyn in the border region between Poland and Germany. Already living illegally in Paris himself, a desperate Grynszpan apparently sought revenge for his family's precarious circumstances by appearing at the German embassy and shooting the diplomatic official assigned to assist him.

Vom Rath died on November 9, 1938, two days after the shooting. The day happened to coincide with the anniversary of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, an important date in the National Socialist calendar. The Nazi Party leadership, assembled in Munich for the commemoration, chose to use the occasion as a pretext to launch a night of antisemitic excesses. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, a chief instigator of the *Kristallnacht* pogroms, suggested to the convened Nazi 'Old Guard' that 'World Jewry' had conspired to commit the assassination. He announced that "the Führer has decided that ... demonstrations should not be prepared or organized by the Party, but insofar as they erupt spontaneously, they are not to be hampered."

November 9–10



"Kristallnacht": nationwide pogrom

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US Holocaust Memorial Museum

Goebbels' words appear to have been taken as a command for unleashing the violence. After his speech, the assembled regional Party leaders issued instructions to their local offices. Violence began to erupt in various parts of the Reich throughout the late evening and early morning hours of November 9–10. At 1:20 a.m. on November 10, Reinhard Heydrich, in his capacity as head of the Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*) sent an urgent telegram to headquarters and stations of the State Police and to SA leaders in their various districts, which contained directives regarding the riots. SA and Hitler Youth units throughout Germany and its annexed territories engaged in the destruction of Jewish-owned homes and businesses. Members of many units wore civilian clothes to support the fiction that the disturbances were expressions of 'outraged public reaction.'

Despite the outward appearance of spontaneous violence, and the local cast which the pogrom **i** took on in various regions throughout the Reich, the central orders Heydrich relayed gave specific instructions: the "spontaneous" rioters were to take no measures endangering non-Jewish German life or property; they were not to subject foreigners (even Jewish foreigners) to violence; and they were to remove all synagogue **i** archives prior to vandalizing synagogues and other properties of the Jewish communities, and to transfer that archival material to the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*, or SD). The orders also indicated that police officials should arrest as many Jews as local jails could hold, preferably young, healthy men.

Destruction of Synagogues and Buildings

Kristallnacht - Photograph



Desecrated Torah scrolls

The rioters destroyed hundreds of synagogues and Jewish institutions throughout Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland. **i** Many synagogues burned throughout the night in full view of the public and of local firefighters, who had received orders to intervene only to prevent flames from spreading to nearby buildings. SA and Hitler Youth members across the country shattered the shop windows of an estimated 7,500 Jewish-owned commercial establishments and looted their wares. Jewish cemeteries became a particular object of desecration in many regions.

The pogrom **i** proved especially destructive in Berlin and Vienna, home to the two largest Jewish communities in the German Reich. Mobs of SA men roamed the streets, attacking Jews in their houses and forcing Jews they encountered to perform acts of public humiliation. Although murder did not figure in the central directives, *Kristallnacht* claimed many Jewish lives between 9 and 10 November. The official figure for Jewish deaths, released by German officials in the aftermath of Kristallnacht, was 91, but recent scholarship suggests that there were hundreds of deaths, especially if one counts those who died of their injuries in the days and weeks that followed the pogrom. **i** Police records of the period also document a high number of rapes and of suicides in the aftermath of the violence.

Arrests of Jewish Men



SS guards force Jews, arrested during Kristallnacht (the "Night of Broken Glass"), to march through the town of Baden-Baden.

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Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz

As the pogrom **i** spread, units of the SS and Gestapo (Secret State Police), following Heydrich's instructions, arrested up to 30,000 Jewish males, and transferred most of them from local prisons to Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and other concentration camps.

Significantly, *Kristallnacht* marks the first instance in which the Nazi regime incarcerated Jews on a massive scale simply on the basis of their ethnicity. Hundreds died in the camps as a result of the brutal treatment they endured. Most did obtain release over the next three months on the condition that they begin the process of emigration from Germany. Indeed, the effects of *Kristallnacht* would serve as a spur to the emigration of Jews from Germany in the months to come.

Aftermath

In the immediate aftermath of the pogrom, **i** many German leaders, like Hermann Göring, criticized the extensive material losses produced by the antisemitic riots, pointing out that if nothing were done to intervene, German insurance companies—not Jewish-owned businesses—would have to bear the costs of the damages. Nevertheless, Göring and other top party leaders decided to use the opportunity to introduce measures to eliminate Jews and perceived Jewish influence from the German economic sphere.

The German government made an immediate pronouncement that “the Jews” themselves were to blame for the pogrom **i** and imposed a fine of one billion Reichsmark (some 400 million US dollars at 1938 rates) on the German Jewish community. The Reich government confiscated all insurance payouts to Jews whose businesses and homes were looted or destroyed, leaving the Jewish owners personally responsible for the cost of all repairs.

Anti-Jewish Legislation

In the weeks that followed, the German government promulgated dozens of laws and decrees designed to deprive Jews of their property and of their means of livelihood. Many of these laws enforced “Aryanization” policy—the transfer of Jewish-owned enterprises and property to “Aryan” ownership, usually for a fraction of their true value. Ensuing legislation barred Jews, already ineligible for employment in the public sector, from practicing most professions in the private sector. The legislation made further strides in removing Jews from public life. German education officials expelled Jewish children still attending German schools. German Jews lost their right to hold a driver’s license or own an automobile. Legislation restricted access to public transport. Jews could no longer gain admittance to “German” theaters, movie cinemas, or concert halls.

American Press Reports on Kristallnacht

American newspapers across the country covered the Nazi assault on Jews in front-page, banner headlines, and articles about the events continued to appear for several weeks. No other story about the persecution of the Jews received such widespread and sustained attention from the American press at any other time during the Nazi era.

German censors sought to block images of Kristallnacht from reaching newspapers in the United States. However, *Life* magazine was able to publish some images in its November 28, 1938, issue.

Perhaps no headline so aptly summarized the danger for the Jews under the Nazi regime than that published on the front page of the *Los Angeles Examiner* on November 23, 1938: "Nazis Warn World Jews Will Be Wiped Out Unless Evacuated By Democracies."

US President Denounces the Nazis

At his press conference on November 15, 1938, one week after *Kristallnacht*, President Franklin D. Roosevelt denounced Nazi Germany's terror attack on Jews, saying, "I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth-century civilization." FDR made an exception to his practice of off-the-record press conferences by allowing newspapers to quote this statement from his meeting with reporters that day.

The president also announced that he had recalled the US ambassador to Germany, Hugh Wilson. The United States was the only nation to recall its ambassador and would not replace him until after the end of the war in 1945.

In response to the news of Nazi terror against Jews, Americans protested in cities including New York and Los Angeles. Other Americans called for an increase in the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country.

Pressure on the US Immigration System

Despite the increasing threat faced by Jews living under Nazi rule in Germany and Austria, President Roosevelt knew that he would not be able to persuade Congress to reconsider immigration regulations. At the same November 15 press conference, a reporter asked the president if he would recommend relaxing the restrictions on immigration in order to admit the Jewish refugees from Europe. Roosevelt replied, "That is not in contemplation; we have the quota system."

Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, whose department oversaw the Immigration and Naturalization Service, persuaded President Roosevelt to allow approximately 12,000 Germans, most of whom were Jews and already in the United States on visitor visas, to remain in the country indefinitely. Although he knew extending the visas could raise congressional objection, the president made his position clear. "I cannot," he said, "in any decent humanity, throw them out." Indeed, no Jews were forced to leave the United States to return to Nazi-occupied Europe for the duration of the war.

Some lawmakers who hoped to change the country's restrictive immigration quota laws saw an opportunity in the wave of sympathy among Americans for refugees after Kristallnacht. On February 9, 1939, Senator Robert F. Wagner (D-NY) and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers (R-MA) introduced identical bills into Congress to offer refuge to 20,000 children under 14 from the Greater German Reich. Despite widespread support, the Wagner-Rogers Bill died in Congress. The quota system remained unchanged throughout the war and into the 1960s.

A Turning Point

The events of *Kristallnacht* represented one of the most important turning points in National Socialist antisemitic policy. Historians have noted that after the pogrom, **i** anti-Jewish policy was concentrated more and more concretely into the hands of the SS. Moreover, the passivity with which most German civilians responded to the violence signaled to the Nazi regime that the German public was prepared for more radical measures.





The Nazi regime expanded and radicalized measures aimed at removing Jews entirely from German economic and social life in the forthcoming years. The regime moved eventually toward policies of forced emigration, and finally toward the realization of a Germany "free of Jews" (*judenrein*) by deportation of the Jewish population "to the East."

Thus, *Kristallnacht* figures as an essential turning point in Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews, which culminated in the attempt to annihilate the European Jews.

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CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

-  How did the events of Kristallnacht compare to previous anti-Jewish actions and violence in Germany under the Nazis?
-  Explore the range of reactions to the violence of Kristallnacht among the German people. What pressures and motivations may have influenced their choice to participate, to help the victims, or to turn away?
-  How did the United States and other nations respond to the news of the nationwide riot? What responsibilities do other nations have to the persecuted citizens of another sovereign nation, if any?
-  How can knowledge of the events in Germany and Europe before the Nazis came to power help citizens today respond to threats of genocide and mass atrocity in the world?

FURTHER READING

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