

Session 8: A History of Kristallnacht

Professor Michael Dobkowski

Starting in the late hours of November 9 and continuing through nightfall on November 10, violence against the Jews of Germany and Austria and their institutions and homes was unleashed in a torrent of destruction. The name given by the Nazis to this night and day of terror was Kristallnacht (“Night of Broken Glass”). Kristallnacht was the prelude to the Holocaust, an indication of what happens when a society falls victim to its basest instincts.

In hundreds of Jewish neighborhoods, paramilitary stormtroopers of the SA—some in their Brownshirt uniforms, others in civilian clothes, often assisted by police and gathering crowds of people—lit fires and threw furniture, books, even sacred Torah scrolls and ritual objects from synagogues, Jewish schools and private homes into the flames. Tens of thousands of Jewish shops, institutions and homes were ransacked. Jews were chased, attacked, reviled and beaten up in virtually every German town, from the capital, Berlin, to the smallest towns and villages. In the twenty-four hours of violence an estimated ninety-one Jews were killed, over 900 synagogues were burned and 7,500 homes and businesses destroyed. Also within this time frame, more than 30,000 Jewish men between the ages of 16 - 60—a quarter of all Jewish men still living in Germany—were arrested and sent to the concentration camps Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen . There they were tormented and tortured for several months. More than a thousand died in those camps. (Source: Martin Gilbert, *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction*, 2006)

Nazi anti-Semitic policy did not begin with Kristallnacht. It began with the systematic legal, economic and social disenfranchisement of the Jews that was initiated and “legislated” within months of the Nazis coming to power in 1933. Eventually, over three hundred laws were passed that would exclude Jews from every facet of German society, economy and polity. This was accomplished in various stages (e.g., the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which, among other things, stripped Jews of their citizenship). One of these steps involved the deportation of Polish Jews who had been living in Germany, legally, for many years. On the night of October 27, 1938, 12,000 Polish Jews were deported. They were taken from their homes forcefully by the Gestapo and were allowed to take with them only one suitcase each and put on trains to the Polish border. Four thousand were accepted by Poland. But 8,000, denied entry into Poland, were forced to stay at the border station of Zbaszyn, and in nearby stables. There, in harsh conditions, they waited for the Polish government to let them in. One expelled couple, the Grynszpan family, who had been living in Hanover for twenty-seven years had a 17 years-old son, Herschel Grynszpan, who was a student in Paris. Upon hearing of the desperate situation of his family, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He purchased a gun and on Monday, November 7 he went to the German embassy in Paris and shot the first diplomat he encountered, the Third Secretary, Ernst vom Rath. In the late afternoon of Wednesday, November 9, vom Rath died from his wounds. This assassination served as a welcome pretext for the Nazi initiation of the Kristallnacht pogrom (organized riot).

Reinhard Heydrich (the head of the Reich Main Security Office which oversaw the Gestapo, police and SD operations), sent a secret telegram on November 10, 1938, to “all headquarters and stations of the State Police” in Germany and Austria: “Due to the death of vom Rath...demonstrations against the Jews to be expected...all over the Reich. There is no reason for police to prevent demonstrations...Synagogues (homes and businesses)...to be set on fire if no danger to German property...” Kristallnacht was not a spontaneous outburst of destruction, but a coordinated, comprehensive pogrom.

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

Apathy in the Western World

The violence of Kristallnacht aroused the world to condemn the Nazi actions. President Franklin D. Roosevelt remembered the American ambassador from Berlin stating that he “could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth century civilization.” However, even the condemnations failed to change western immigration policies. With a few exceptions (e.g. England, which increased its absorption of refugees after Kristallnacht), the doors to safety remained barred. As one leader of Germany Jewry stated two months after Kristallnacht (January 25, 1939), “from America, nothing tangible (in immigration possibilities) has arrived.” With violent anti-Semitism now institutionalized, and with few places to flee, the Jews of Germany, Austria, and later, occupied Europe, were trapped and doomed.

Kristallnacht serves as the symbol of that destruction. The synagogues and Torah scrolls that were burned and desecrated signified, as Rabbi Leo Baeck had earlier realized, that “the thousand-year history of the Jews in Germany had come to an end.

“It is that noble history and glorious legacy of German Jewry that we remember on Kristallnacht, a legacy of religious scholarship, intellectual creativity and scientific achievement. Nobel Prize winners and rabbinical scholars, businessmen and soldiers, government ministers and social activists, writers and artists, students and working people, all had their worlds shattered, along with the thousands of windows that gave Kristallnacht its name.” (Courtesy of the Simon Wiesenthal Center)

The Legacy of Kristallnacht

There are important lessons to be drawn from Kristallnacht, for it serves as a bridge experience for both Jews and Germans. For Jews, it taught that even in the twentieth century a whole people can be demonized; that a whole nation can be turned against a decent, creative, loyal and integral part of its own society. It also demonstrated that apathy can still pervade the world when the lives of Jews or other minorities are threatened.

For the Nazis, Kristallnacht taught that while the world might condemn their pogroms, it would not actually oppose them. World opinion, however, taught the Nazi bureaucrats and planners the value of secrecy, the benefit of hiding what they would do in the future from the victims and from the eyes of world indignation. The less the outside world knew or saw, the more efficient would be the genocidal actions that ultimately set the stage for the “Final Solution”—the systematic killing of 6,000,000 Jewish men, women and children.

Kristallnacht taught as well, in hindsight, a powerful historical lesson, that what begins as something finite and limited in time can develop into something horrific and unthinkable; that evil has gradations and is a process that can move easily, almost effortlessly forward to greater evil. Apathy and indifference can empower evil. Kristallnacht was more than just the shattering of windows and dreams--it portended the physical destruction of European Jewry. It was a warning that went unheeded. As such, this commemoration must be observed both as a memorial and as a call to future vigilance and action. (Sources: Martin Gilbert, [Kristallnacht](#) and the Simon Wiesenthal Center).

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Historical Overview of the November Pogrom (*'Kristallnacht'*)

Morris Wortman, M. D.

Introduction

On the night of November 9th-10th 1938, in cities and towns throughout Germany and Austria organized and violent chaos ruled the night. Synagogues burned, shop windows were smashed, homes were forcibly entered and looted while Jewish children awoke to the sounds of violation as the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) was given permission to destroy Jewish homes, business and *shuls* (synagogues). Jewish men were humiliated, beaten and arrested.

The word was a derisive euphemism coined by Walter Funk—Minister for Economic Affairs under the Nazi regime—at a meeting on November 12, 1938, organized by Dr. Joseph Goebbels. From a Jewish perspective, it trivialized an all out pogrom against the Jews. In time *Kristallnacht* would mark what many consider the beginning of the Holocaust. The word would signal a seismic shift in the Nazi policy towards the Jews.

Kristallnacht was the culmination of the systematic discrimination and persecution that followed Hitler's rise to power on **January 30, 1933** when President Hindenburg appointed him Chancellor of Germany. There were a half-million Jews in Germany in January 1933—about three-quarters of one percent of the German population. Jews had been disproportionately successful in Germany far beyond their small numbers. Their communities in Germany dated back over 1000 years and by the time Hitler was named Chancellor they were well integrated into German society, most considering themselves “German” before identifying themselves as Jewish. To many German Jews it was unthinkable that they would be singled out by the Nazi's as the “enemy within.” Yet, in time, Nazi propaganda painted the Jews as *the* cause of Germany's humiliating defeat in The Great War—despite the fact that many Jews fought valiantly for their homeland--and the cause of her subsequent economic difficulties.

Hugh Carleton Green, the Berlin-based correspondent for the London *Daily Telegraph*, would write:

“Mob law ruled in Berlin throughout the afternoon and evening and hordes of hooligans indulged in an orgy of destruction. I have seen several anti-Jewish outbreaks in Germany during the last five years, but never anything as nauseating as this. Racial hatred and hysteria seemed to have taken complete hold of otherwise decent people. I saw fashionably dressed women clapping their hands and screaming with glee, while respectable middle-class mothers held up their babies to see the “fun.””

The March to *Kristallnacht*

One of the earliest harbingers of *Kristallnacht* occurred a few weeks after the *Anschluss*—the annexation of Austria--on **April 1, 1933**—when the SA enforced a one-day boycott of Jewish shops in Berlin. Hitler was testing the waters--gauging Jewish support among German gentiles. Scarcely a week later on **April 7, 1933** the German government enacted a law--the Law for

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

Restoration of a Professional Civil Service--which forbade Jews from continuing to work in any branch of the civil service, schools and universities. On **April 21, 1933** the kosher preparation meat was outlawed. An **April 25, 1933** law was passed that prohibited "overcrowding" of German schools. The law limited the number of Jewish students who could enroll in public schools.

By the end of 1933 forty-two laws were passed which limited the abilities of German Jews to earn a living, enjoy full citizenship and obtain education. Additional laws were passed in 1934. In fact, by the outbreak of WWII over 400 pieces of separate legislation were adopted that prevented Jews from working, going to school, or otherwise taking part in German society. These laws robbed Jews of their possessions, professions, citizenship, educational opportunities and demonized their traditions, their heritage and their religion. These laws had no purpose other than to isolate and harass Germany's Jewish population in hopes that they would emigrate and make Germany *Judenfrei* ("Jew free") or *Judenrein* ("Jew-cleansed").

On **May 10, 1933** books by Jewish authors, along with other books not approved by the Nazis were burned in huge bonfires. Jewish artists were no longer allowed to exhibit their works. Jews, along with Hitler's political enemies, were thrown into concentration camps to work under terrible conditions. By the end of 1933 more than 30 Jews had been killed.

After President Hindenburg's death in August 1934 Hitler combined the positions of president and chancellor naming himself as *Führer*. The democratic constitution was scrapped and replaced with a Nazi dictatorship.

Forced to Flee

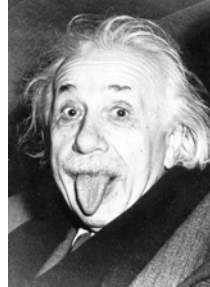
As Jewish-hatred mounted many were forced to flee—among them some of the great Jewish minds of their time.

Bertolt Brecht--who wrote *The Threepenny Opera*, one of Germany's most important writers. His plays and books were banned in Germany causing him to flee to Denmark.

Albert Einstein—winner of the 1921 Nobel Prize in physics. After his property was seized in 1933 he fled to Belgium and emigrated to the U.S. in October 1933.



Bertolt Brecht



Albert Einstein

By the mid-1930s numerous Jewish physicians fled from Germany to the U.S. In addition to Einstein these were Theodore Karman, John Neumann, Eugene Wigner, Leo Szilard, Hans Bethe, Edward Teller and Lise Meitner—the only Jewish woman physicist. Additionally, the famous Catholic physicist Enrico Fermi—married to a Jewess--also fled to the U.S. after Mussolini introduced Nazi racial laws into Italy. It can be safely said that Nazi anti-Semitism cost Germany the atomic bomb.

At the annual Nazi Party Rally held in Nuremberg on the 12th anniversary of the Beer Hall Putsch--**November 8-9, 1935**--the Nazi ideology became codified in what is today known as the Nuremberg Laws. The laws, personally signed by Hitler, excluded Jews from Reich citizenship and prohibited them from marrying or having sexual relations with persons of "German or related blood." A "Jew" was no longer defined by his or her religious beliefs but rather as the descendant of a bloodline. Anyone who had three or four Jewish grandparents was defined as a full Jew. Those with one or two Jewish grandparents were *Mischlinge*: first degree - two Jewish grandparents; second degree - one Jewish grandparent. The fate of first or second degree *Mischlinge* would be decided at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942.

Germans who had not practiced Judaism and even those had converted to Christianity were defined as Jews by their bloodlines. Later on survivors of the Holocaust would note that one could not escape their Judaism. "*If you didn't know whether or not you were a Jew, Hitler would make sure you knew*" was a phrase often repeated by my father, Israel. Many Jews believed that the discriminatory measures would cease after enactment of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws and were prepared to accept life as second-class citizens.

For a period of time—between the Nazi rally at Nuremberg in 1935 and the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, the Nazis moderated their anti-Jewish rhetoric in an attempt to avoid criticism in the international community. But this reprieve would not last much beyond the games as the Nazis

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

set out to strip the Jews of their property. Businesses were “transferred” to non-Jewish Germans who bought them at prices fixed by the Nazis. Jewish physicians were no longer able to treat non-Jews and Jewish lawyers were forbidden to practice their profession.

From January 30, 1933 to the outbreak of WWII Hitler’s policy towards the Jews was to encourage Jewish emigration. The United States and Britain together took in about half of Germany’s Jews. Another 35,000 German Jews were allowed to immigrate to Palestine under the British Mandate. The Arab revolt of 1936, however, resulted in further restrictions to Jewish immigration in an attempt to placate Arab anti-Jewish sentiment.

But while the emigration of German Jews increased, the *Anschluss*—annexation of Austria on **March 12, 1938**—brought the third largest Jewish community in Europe under Hitler’s rule. In his quest for *Lebensraum* Hitler’s “Jewish Problem” outpaced Jewish emigration. It is worth noting that Austria was extremely anti-Semitic. On March 11, 1938, knowing that the Anschluss was about to happen, Austrian Nazis took to the streets of Vienna in a violent frenzy that would last for several days—the police stood by and did nothing. Jewish men and women were beaten or humiliated. Some were forced to clean out army toilets while wearing *tefillin* also called phylacteries (*Tefillin* are a pair of black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with Bible verses). The New York Times reported that up to 170 Jews were committing suicide each day just after the *Anschluss*.

On **March 13, 1938**, under pressure from American Jewry, President Roosevelt asked for an increase in the German quota. A Bill was introduced and referred to the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization—only to die in committee.

With the *Anschluss* came increasingly dramatic anti-Semitic displays in Austria and Germany. The popular euphoria for Hitler, National Socialism and unification with Germany was matched by hatred for and violence against the Jews—surpassing any such displays in Germany up to that date. In the meantime, the Polish government, watching the results of the *Anschluss*, feared the return of newly destitute Jews as Nuremberg-like laws were set to take effect in Austria. And so on **March 31, 1938** the Polish Government forbade the repatriation of Jews to Poland. Berlin had, up to this point, encouraged the emigration of Jews.

With the border closed to Jews fleeing toward Poland negotiations between Berlin and Warsaw began in earnest. The Poles did not give in and insisted that Polish citizens living abroad were to present their passports by **October 30, 1938** to Polish legations in order to allow a special visa to be granted allowing them to return to Poland—but the new ordinance did not apply to the Jews living in Germany and Austria. The Jews of Germany and Austria were quickly running out of options. As Dr. Chaim Weitzman—who would in 1948 become Israel’s first President—was quoted in the *Manchester Guardian* “The world seemed to be divided into two parts – those places where the Jews could not live and those where they could not enter.”¹ His words were to become even more poignant as events of the 1930s and 40s unfolded.

One of the most important events in the months leading up to *Kristallnacht* was the Évian Conference (**July 6 – 15, 1938**). The decision to have a conference addressing the Jewish refugee crisis was made on **March 23, 1938** by President Roosevelt shortly after the *Anschluss*. Switzerland was approached as the site of the conference but was unwilling to host it fearing that it would be seen as a provocation to the Führer; besides Switzerland had already begun restricting immigration of Jews from Germany and Austria. It was decided that the venue should be Évian-les-Bains on the shores of Lake Geneva in France.

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

The conference began with an unfortunate premise—it was clear from the start that none of the participating countries would be asked to increase their quota of refugees but that solutions to the Jewish refugee crisis would be discussed. Roosevelt offered that his Consular Service remove unnecessary red tape for visa requests for those wishing to emigrate from Germany and Austria and to provide more sympathetic handling of these cases at U.S. consulates. This did succeed in filling the U.S. quota for German immigrants in 1938 of nearly 26,000.

Britain was concerned that Palestine, which it ruled under a League of Nations Mandate, might be suggested as a possible solution to the crisis. Unfortunately, Britain was concerned with a repeat of the 1936 Arab uprising in Palestine against Jewish immigration to Palestine and insisted that Palestine be left off the list of potential receiving countries. This was ironic inasmuch as Palestine did not have an unemployment problem—as other countries did. In fact it had a labor shortage largely because of an economic boom brought about by the Zionists. Apart from the British concern over the potential Jewish problem in Palestine the Roman Catholic Church did not support either Jewish emigration to Palestine or, in fact, the Balfour Declaration that it declared it a Homeland for the Jews.

In a letter dated 22nd June 1943 to Myron Taylor, President Roosevelt's special emissary to the pope, A.G. Cicognani, special representative of pope Pius XII said:

“It is true that at one time Palestine was inhabited by the Hebrew Race, but there is no axiom in history to substantiate the necessity of a people returning to a country they left nineteen centuries before If a 'Hebrew Home' is desired, it would not be too difficult to find a more fitting territory than Palestine. With an increase in the Jewish population there, grave, new international problems would arise.”

From the start the Évian Conference was doomed. This was signaled when Roosevelt instead of sending a high-level state department official sent his close friend, Myron C. Taylor President of U.S. Steel. In the end The United States—who had called for the conference-- would not offer to accept more Jews; neither would Britain who took the potential of increased immigration to Palestine off the table. Besides the Roman Catholic Church's position on Jewish immigration to Palestine the Anglican Church also did not support an increased Jewish presence in Palestine. In fact, the only country that was willing to accept Jewish immigration was the Dominican Republic—at a steep price!

T. W. White, Australia's delegate to the conference showed no sympathy toward the Jewish plight. “It will no doubt be appreciated that as we have no racial problem we are not desirous of importing one.”

Gold Meir--Prime Minister of Israel from 1969 – 1974—was among the uninvited delegation of Jews from Palestine, wrote in her Memoirs

“sitting there in that magnificent hall and listening to the delegates of thirty-two countries rise, each in turn, to explain how much they would have liked to take in substantial numbers of refugees and how unfortunate it was that they were not able to do so, was a terrible experience, I don't think that anyone who didn't live through it can understand what I felt at Evian – a mixture of sorrow, rage, frustration and horror.”

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

While every delegate expressed sympathy to the Jewish plight most offered no refuge. In fact, the conference *did not even pass a resolution condemning the Nazis*. The failure of the Évian Conference is often referred to as Hitler's "green light for genocide."

Following the conference the German government's propaganda machine was able to categorically state that the world democracies had failed the Jews. Six years after his rise to power and only 6 months following the Évian Conference Hitler made the following statement to the Reichstag.

"...it is a shameful spectacle to see how the whole democratic world is oozing sympathy for the poor, tormented Jewish people, but remains hard-hearted and obdurate when it comes to helping them."

On June 9, 1938, the main synagogue in Munich was burned down. On **August 10, 1938** a Nuremberg synagogue met with the same fate. On **August 17, 1938** a new law declared that all Jews had to use the name Israel (for a man) and Sarah (for a woman) before their own first names.

On **October 15, 1938** German authorities announced that the passports of all German Jews were cancelled. After an attack on German tourists by a group of Belgian Jews protesting German legislation, the German government responded by banning all meetings of Jews inside the Reich.

Three weeks before *Kristallnacht*, on **October 18, 1938** more than 12,000 Polish-born Jews—Jews that had been legally living in Germany—were expelled. They were ordered to leave their possessions behind and take with them one suitcase each. All that they had earned and accumulated in Germany had been seized by the Nazi authorities and their one-time neighbors. These twelve-thousand were taken to the nearest train stations and sent to the Polish border.

Four thousand was accepted into Poland leaving 8,000 on stone floors of a nearby horse stable in the Polish border station of Zbasyn. The Polish authorities procrastinated in issuing entry permits while thousands waited—confused, hungry, penniless and angry. Five Jews committed suicide!

One of the expelled couples, Mr. and Mrs. Grynspan, had been living in Hanover for 27 years. Their 17 year old son, Herschel, escaped deportation as he was living in Paris at the time. Herschel's sister Berta sent him a postcard from the railway station at Zbasyn. "No one told us what was up, but we realized this was gong to be the end...We haven't a penny. Could you send us something?"

Herschel received his sister's postcard on **November 3rd, 1938**. Grynspan's outrage was fueled by an article in a Paris Yiddish newspaper the following day describing the hopelessness of the Jews at Zbasyn.

"Critical situation of Polish Jews deported from Germany. More than 8,000 persons have overnight been made stateless. They were rounded up and departed, largely to Zbasyn, in no-man -land between Germany and Poland. Their living conditions are uncomfortable and distressing. 1,200 of them have fallen ill and several hundred are without shelter....A number of cases of insanity and suicide have been reported."

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

On **November 7, 1938**—Herschel, deciding to take matters into his own hands, stopped into *La Fine Lame* (“At the Sharp Blade”), a store that sold guns and ammunition, just as it was opening. He purchased a pistol and bullets, never stopping at the police station to register the weapon.



Herschel Grynszpan

Instead Herschel took the Metro to the German Embassy in Paris, arriving there at 9:30 A. M. on November 7th. Young Herschel was cleared by the doorman with an “important document” to deliver to the German Ambassador Count Johannes von Welczeck—who, at the time was leaving of the embassy for his morning walk—a decision that would save his life. Herschel, however, insisted on seeing someone and was directed by the porter Henri Nagorka, to Third Secretary Ernst vom Rath—the only official on duty that morning. When vom Rath asked to see the document Herschel shouted, “You are a *sale boche* [filthy kraut] and here in the name of 12,000 persecuted Jews, this is your document!” The young Grynszpan emptied his gun. Two of the shots hit vom Rath in the stomach but were not immediately fatal. Herschel, surprised that vom Rath had not died, did not flee—instead he sat quietly in a chair. Herschel later told his interrogators “It’s not a crime to be Jewish. I’m not a dog. I have the right to live and the Jewish people has a right to exist in the world. Everywhere I am persecuted like an animal.”

Herschel’s act of vengeance provided the Nazis with the excuse they were looking for. The attack would provoke havoc throughout Germany and Austria.

On learning of the attempted murder Hitler sent his personal physician, Dr. Brandt, to fly to Paris. That same day all Jewish newspapers and magazines were ordered to shutter their businesses. In this manner the Jewish community of Germany was cut off not only from

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

communication but its leadership. Jewish children could no longer attend 'Aryan' state elementary schools and Jewish cultural activities were suspended.

Plans for *Kristallnacht* were already in the works though the Nazis would characterize what followed as a *spontaneous* outburst. On the night of **November 8th** the execution of Jews who had been incarcerated months earlier at Buchenwald had begun.

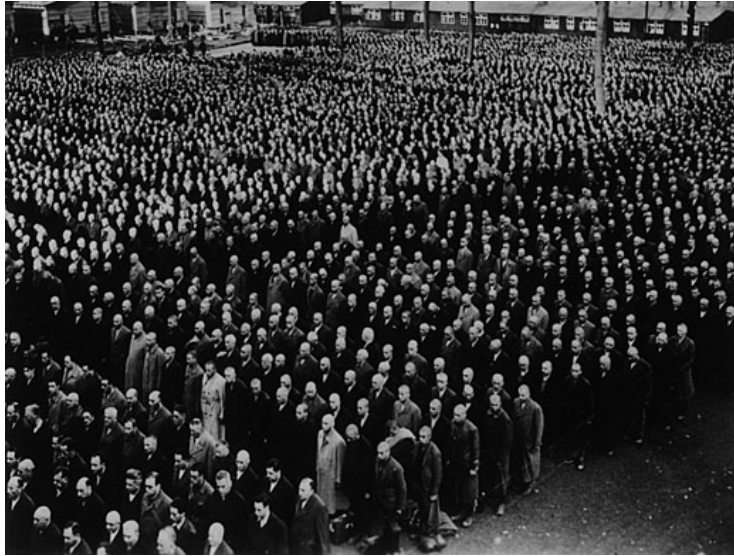
Hitler was in Munich for the annual celebration of the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. When vom Rath died on the evening of November 9th Joseph Goebbels, the Reich's Propaganda Minister, told the Fuhrer that violence against Jews had already broken out in several German cities. Goebbels, in his diary, noted that Hitler "*decides: demonstrations should be allowed to continue. The police should be withdrawn. For once the Jews should get the feel of popular anger.*"

Goebbels, saw the vom Rath killing as an opportunity to take the persecution of the Jews to a new level and to redeem himself in Hitler's eyes. By then, Hitler had criticized the effectiveness of Goebbels' propaganda and had also learned that Goebbels was having an affair with a Czech actress.

After the shooting, Goebbels ordered all newspaper editors in the Reich to print on page one the report about the vom Rath shooting by a Jew. The Nazi Party paper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, had already set the tone in its November 8, 1938 headline: "Jewish Murder Attempt in Paris—Member of the German Embassy Critically Wounded by Shots—The Murdering Knave a 17-Year-Old Jew." The following day Goebbels' paper, *Der Angriff*, proclaimed, "From this vile deed arises the imperative demand for immediate action against the Jews, with the most severe consequences."

What followed was swift and furious--the Nazis unleashed a wave of pogroms against Germany's Jews. In the space of a few hours, thousands of synagogues, Jewish businesses and homes were damaged or destroyed. This event came to be called *Kristallnacht* ("Night of Broken Glass") for the shattered store and residential windowpanes that carpeted German streets. This violence did not happen in a single German city—it happened in hundreds of German cities, towns and villages.

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*



Jews arrested during *Kristallnacht* line up for roll call at the Buchenwald concentration camp. November 1938. *Lorenz C. Schmuhl Papers, USHMM Archives*

Stormtroopers killed at least 91 Jews and injured many others. Thirty-thousand Jewish men between the ages of sixteen and sixty were arrested and transported to Nazi concentration camps in Dachau, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. Release came only after the prisoners arranged to emigrate and agreed to “transfer” their property to the “Aryans.” In a display that made clear that the elderly would not spared humiliation the residents of a Jewish home in Düsseldorf were ordered to leave within 48 hours. Men and women in their 60s and 70s and without any means of support were forced on to the streets.

Kristallnacht removed any illusion that the Jews would be allowed to exist in some kind of apartheid state. Moreover, the Nazis no longer felt a need to hide behind the illusion of mob-driven destruction. Following *Kristallnacht* the systematic persecution of Jews became official state policy. November 9th was in a real sense the “end of the beginning” while November 10th was the “beginning of the end.” After the November Pogrom a threshold had been crossed.

Synagogues

Synagogues occupy a central place in Jewish religious and communal life. To the Nazis, however, they served as a powerful physical reminder of the Jewish presence in Germany and Austria. In the months preceding *Kristallnacht*, synagogues in major cities--Munich, Nuremberg, Dortmund, and Kaiserslautern--were demolished on the orders of local Nazi party officials.

The story of the Great Synagogue of Munich is described at the Eichmann trial testimony by Benno Cohn on April 25, 1961. According to Cohn, the Führer, on a previous visit to Munich, *‘had asked what the building was, and had said: “When I come to Munich next time, I don’t want to see this building again!” So they pulled down the synagogue. That was not published in the press. There was a severe ban on publishing it. But I saw it with my own eyes.’* The Great Synagogue sat next to the German Art House and disturbed Hitler, who ordered it taken down before German Art Day on July 8, 1938.

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

On the night of November 9, the violence became nationwide. The Reuters news agency would report that when dawn broke on November 10th that synagogues had been burned down in Stettin on the Baltic, Konstanz near the Swiss border, Essen (built in 1913) and Düsseldorf along with Krefeld, Cottbus and Brandenburg. Essen was among the finest synagogues in Germany. In Mainz, six synagogues were destroyed along with the Jewish religious school, Jewish museum, the Jewish library and the Jewish cemetery (whose gravestones went back 900 years).

The Nazis often had Jews participate in their own cultural and religious destruction. In Vienna, where 22 Jews were reported to have committed suicide, truckloads of Jews were taken by the SA to Doliner Street and forced to do the work of destroying a synagogue. Later on Jews would be asked to perform much more horrific acts in the Final Solution.

Robert Smallbones, The British Consul General in Frankfurt sent a report to London summarizing the events of the day in Wiesbaden. The violence began at 6 AM 'with burning of all synagogues.' Mr. Smallbones also noted that 'organized groups of both political formations—brown-shirted SA and black-shirted SS—'visited every Jewish shop and office, destroying windows, goods and equipment.' All rabbis and other religious leaders and teachers were placed under arrest. Over 2000 Jews were arrested in Wiesbaden alone.

After seizing the archives and valuables, they destroyed the interiors and desecrated religious objects. Wherever possible, the Nazi assailants tried to set the buildings ablaze, while firemen protected nearby "Aryan" property.

When the violence ended on the night of November 10, rioters had burned or destroyed between 1,300 – 2,000 synagogues. German city officials, anxious to remove traces of these buildings, often ordered their immediate demolition and forced the Jewish community to pay for the costs. In addition 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed, and countless cemeteries and schools were vandalized.



The Boerneplatz synagogue in flames during *Kristallnacht* (the "Night of Broken Glass"). Frankfurt am Main, Germany, November 10, 1938. Courtesy USHMM

Dobkowski and Wortman

Jewish Businesses

Jewish businesses had long been the target of Nazi wrath. On April 1, 1933, just two months after Hitler came to power in Germany—as noted above--the Nazis sponsored a nationwide boycott of Jewish enterprises. Though only partially successful, it served as a harbinger of more drastic policies to come.

Throughout the 1930s, German Jewish businessmen were pressured to close their enterprises or sell them to "Aryans" at a fraction of their true value. By April 1938, the number of Jewish-owned businesses had declined from about 100,000 in January 1933 to 39,552. Retail stores were especially hard hit -- only some 9,000 shops of an estimated 55,000 were still in Jewish hands in by mid-1938. In the escalation to *Kristallnacht* the Nazis renewed their efforts to eliminate Jews from the German economy.

Jewish businesses were hard-hit during the November pogroms. Massive looting occurs as Jewish storefronts were smashed. Some 7,500 Jewish enterprises were damaged or destroyed on November 9th and 10th. Adding insult to injury the Jews were forced to pay the costs of the pogroms while being banned from the economy. Insurance monies to cover the damage were confiscated forcing Jewish storeowners and homeowners to make repairs at their own costs. In addition, a 1 billion *Reichmarks* (400 million dollars) "atonement fee" was placed on the community.



Germans view the damage caused to a Jewish-owned store in Berlin. November 10, 1938. *National Archives*

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

After *Kristallnacht*...

In the ten months following *Kristallnacht* and the outbreak of WWII more than 115,000 Jews emigrated from Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland. Tens of thousands went to the U.S., Great Britain and Palestine. Some 14,000 made it to Shanghai. In fact, the combined German-Austrian annual immigration quota of 27,370 was filled for the first time since Hitler came to power.

In the wake of *Kristallnacht*, the Nazis increased the pressure on Jews to leave. Responsibility for accelerating Jewish emigration from the Reich now fell fully into the hands of the SS.

The Days after – November 12th and 13th 1938

On November 12th Field Marshal Goering met at the Air Ministry in Berlin with German Ministers of the Interior, Propaganda, Finance and Economics. Goering announced that he has received instructions from the Führer through Martin Borman instructing him to solve the Jewish question.

The November 12th meeting of the Nazi leadership—Goering, Goebbels, Reinhard Heydrich, Walter Funk and other ranking Nazi officials—had two purposes: to make the Jews responsible for *Kristallnacht* and to use the events of the days preceding it as a rationale for enacting a series of anti-Semitic laws which would effectively remove Jews from the German economy.

'Gentlemen! Today's meeting is of a decisive nature... I have received a letter written on the Führer's orders requesting that the Jewish question be now, once and for all, coordinated and solved one way or another.'

'Since the problem is mainly an economic one, it is from the economic angle it shall have to be tackled. Because, gentlemen, I have had enough of these demonstrations! They don't harm the Jew but me, who is the final authority for coordinating the German economy. `If today a Jewish shop is destroyed, if goods are thrown into the street, the insurance companies will pay for the damages; and, furthermore, consumer goods belonging to the people are destroyed. If in the future, demonstrations which are necessary occur, then, I pray, that they be directed so as not to hurt us.'

'Because it's insane to clean out and burn a Jewish warehouse, then have a German insurance company make good the loss. And the goods which I need desperately, whole bales of clothing and whatnot, are being burned. And I miss them everywhere. I may as well burn the raw materials before they arrive.'

'I should not want to leave any doubt, gentlemen, as to the aim of today's meeting. We have not come together merely to talk again, but to make decisions, and I implore competent agencies to take all measures for the elimination of the Jew from the German economy, and to submit them to me.'

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

Following the meeting, a wide-ranging set of anti-Semitic laws were passed which had the clear intent, in Goering's words, of "*Aryanizing*" the German economy. Over the next two or three months, the following measures were put into effect

- ❖ Jews were required to turn over all precious metals to the government.
- ❖ Pensions for Jews dismissed from civil service jobs were arbitrarily reduced.
- ❖ Jewish-owned bonds, stocks, jewelry and art works were to be turned over to the German state.
- ❖ Jews were physically segregated within German towns.
- ❖ Jews were to no longer to own carrier pigeons.
- ❖ Jewish driver's licenses were revoked.
- ❖ Jewish owned radios were confiscated.
- ❖ A curfew took effect which kept Jews off the streets between 9:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. in the summer and 8:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. in the winter.
- ❖ Laws protecting tenants were made non-applicable to Jewish tenants.
- ❖ Jews were prohibited from owning weapons and ammunition. Jews in possession of weapons and ammunition were to turn them over to the local police.
- ❖ Jews could no longer acquire, possess or carry firearms and ammunition. They could not possess truncheons, knives or other stabbing weapons.

In addition, signs hung on food stores, cafés, restaurants, pharmacists and banks—"No Jews Admitted!" Jews, who knew a friendly shopkeeper, could buy their bread, milk and other food stuffs only after nightfall at the back door. Jews were quickly eliminated from theatres, concerts, cinemas, music halls, dance floors and other entertainment venues. On **November 13, 1939** Goebbels told an audience in Berlin. *'It is equivalent to degradation of German art to expect a German to sit next to a Jew in a theatre or cinema. If the parasites had not been treated much too well in the past, it would not have been necessary to make such short work of them now.'*

That night Sir George Ogilvie Forbes telegraphed the Foreign Office of the ***Sunday Express*** in London that many of Berlin's Jews are "wandering about in the streets and parks afraid to return to their homes...I can find no words strong enough in condemnation of the disgusting treatment of so many innocent people, and the civilized world is faced with the appalling sight of 500,000 people about to rot away in starvation." That same day, however, the *Sunday Express* published an editorial note 'For the Jews of Britain,' it stated 'this is a word of warning. Do not seek to admit too many foreigners into our country. Some, yes. But do not go beyond the limits caution dictates.'

Kristallnacht turns out to be a crucial turning point in German policy regarding the Jews and many consider it to be the actual beginning of what is now called the Holocaust. By Goebbels' November 12th meeting it is clear that forced immigration of Jews out of the Reich is not feasible—there simply aren't countries to accept them. Hitler is already considering an invasion of Poland. Numerous concentration camps and forced labor camps have already been established and are in operation. The Nuremberg Laws are in place and Hitler's ideology of *lebensraum* has already emerged. Importantly, the passivity of the German people in the face of this massive pogrom signals that the Nazis will encounter little opposition.

On the 40th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, Helmut Schmidt, the former West German chancellor, spoke in a synagogue in Cologne about the significance of these 48 hours:

Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

“The German night, whose observance after the passage of forty years has brought us together today, remains a cause of bitterness and shame. In those places where the houses of God stood in flames, where a signal from those in power set off a train of destruction and robbery, of humiliation, abduction and incarceration—there was an end to peace, to justice, to humanity. The night of 9 November 1938 marked one of the stages along the path leading down to hell.”



Jews hoping to receive exit visas at a police station in Vienna.
From Archives of USHMM

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Dobkowski and Wortman

The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust
Session 8: *Kristallnacht*

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