



READING: Kristallnacht -- Night of the Broken Glass

The following reading is excerpted from *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Brookline, MA), 1994, chapter 6, reading 6 ("Taking a Stand," pp. 268-270), chapter 6, reading 7 ("World Responses," pp. 270-272), and chapter 6, reading 8 ("The Narrowing Circle," pp. 272-273). For more information on Kristallnacht, see also "The Night of the Pogrom" (chapter 6, reading 5, pp. 263-268).

On the night of November 9th, known as Kristallnacht ("Night of the Broken Glass"), Nazis and their followers looted and destroyed thousands of Jewish homes and businesses, and scores of synagogues. Over ninety Jews were killed that night, and 30,000 others were sent to concentration camps. For Christians and Jews, not only in Germany but also in countries around the world, Kristallnacht was a turning point.

Taking a Stand

German Jews saw Kristallnacht as a turning point. So did many "Aryan" Germans. They also made important choices that night and in the days that followed. Dan Bar-On, an Israeli psychologist, describes the decision one family made:

It was the autumn of 1938. Andre was twelve years old and lived with his parents in a small town in northern Germany. One evening he came home from his youth movement meeting.

"Daddy," he said to his father, "we were told at the meeting that tomorrow we are supposed to throw stones at the Jewish shops in town. Should I take part?"

His father looked at him. "What do you think?"

"I don't know. I have nothing against the Jews – I hardly know them – but everyone is going to throw stones. So what should I do?"

Their conversation proceeded, the son presenting questions to his father, the father turning the questions back to his son.

"I understand," said Andre. "You want me to make up my own mind. I'm going for a walk. I'll let you know what I've decided when I come back."

When Andre returned a short while later, he approached his parents, who were sitting at the table. "I've made up my mind, but my decision involves you too."

"What is it?"

"I've decided not to throw stones at the Jewish shops. But tomorrow everyone will say, 'Andre, the son of X, did not take part, he refused to throw stones!' They will turn against you. What are you going to do?"

His father's sigh was one of relief tinged with pride. "While you were out, your mother and I discussed this question. We decided that if you made up your mind to throw stones, we would have to live with your decision, since we had let you decide, after all. But if you decided not to

throw stones, we would leave Germany immediately.”

And that is what they did. The following day, Andre’s family left Germany.¹

Other Germans made other choices. Some protested by resigning their membership in the Nazi party – though many made it clear that they were not objecting to antisemitism but to mob violence. Others sent anonymous letters of protest to foreign embassies. Still others quietly brought Jewish families food and other necessities to replace items that had been destroyed. Neighbors told one Jewish woman that helping her was a way to “show the Jews that the German people had no part in this – it is only Goebbels and his gang.”

Most Germans, however, responded much the way Melita Maschmann did. She lived in a small suburb of Berlin and knew nothing of Kristallnacht until the next morning. As she picked her way through the broken glass on her way to work, she asked a policeman what had happened. After he explained, she recalls:

I went on my way shaking my head. For the space of a second I was clearly aware that something terrible had happened there. Something frighteningly brutal. But almost at once I switched over to accepting what had happened as over and done with, and avoiding critical reflection. I said to myself: the Jews are the enemies of the New Germany. Last night they had a taste of what this means... With these or similar thoughts, I constructed for myself a justification of the pogrom. But in any case, I forced the memory of it out of my consciousness as quickly as possible. As the years went by, I grew better and better at switching off quickly in this manner on similar occasions.²

Maschmann was not alone in placing the night in perspective. Dietrich Goldschmidt, a minister in the Confessing Church, explains that for most Germans “the persecution of the Jews, this escalating persecution of the Jews, and the 9th of November – in a sense, that was only one event, next to very many gratifying ones. Here the famous stories of all the things Hitler did come in: ‘He got rid of unemployment, he built the Autobahn, the people started doing well again, he restored our national pride again. One has to weigh that against the other things.’”³

World Responses

Newspapers around the world reported Kristallnacht. The story filed by Otto D. Tolischus of the New York Times was typical of many.

A wave of destruction, looting and incendiaries unparalleled in Germany since the Thirty Years War and in Europe generally since the Bolshevik revolution, swept over Greater Germany today as National Socialist cohorts took vengeance on Jewish shops, offices and synagogues for the murder by a young Polish Jew of Ernst von Rath, third secretary of the Germany Embassy in Paris.

Beginning systematically in the early morning hours in almost every town and city in the country, the wrecking, looting and burning continued all day. Huge but mostly silent crowds looked on and the police confined themselves to regulating traffic and making wholesale arrests of Jews “for their own protection.”

All day the main shopping districts as well as the side streets of Berlin and innumerable other places resounded to the shattering of shop windows falling to the pavement, the dull thuds of furniture and fittings being pounded to pieces and clamor of fire brigades rushing to burning shops and synagogues. Although shop fires were quickly extinguished, synagogue fires were merely kept from spreading to adjoining buildings.⁴

People everywhere were outraged. As the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, wrote in a letter to the editor of the Times, “There are times when the mere instincts of humanity make silence impossible.” Thousands of Americans agreed. They showed their outrage at huge rallies held in support of German Jews. In reporting these events to Berlin, the German ambassador expressed a fear that these protests might jeopardize the Munich agreement.

Although Kristallnacht strained the policy of appeasement, it did not end it. When members of Britain's Parliament pressed Neville Chamberlain to condemn the pogrom, he simply verified that newspaper reports were "substantially correct." He also acknowledged "deep and widespread sympathy" for those who were made "to suffer so severely" for the "senseless crime committed in Paris."

Similar attitudes in France led the editor of a newspaper called *La Lumière*, to warn, "In the past, when we protested against massacres in Ethiopia, China, Spain, we were told, 'Silence! You are warmongering.' When we protested against the mutilation of Czechoslovakia, we were told, 'Keep quiet! You are a war party.' Today, when we protest against the contemptible persecution of defenseless Jews and their wives and children, we are told, 'Be silent! France is afraid.'"⁵

The only world leader to take a stand was Franklin D. Roosevelt. He did so only after a number of individual and groups had urged him to speak out. On November 15, six days after Kristallnacht, he opened a press conference by stating, "The news of the last few days from Germany has deeply shocked public opinion in the United States. Such news from any part of the world would produce a similar profound reaction among American people in every part of the nation. I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth-century civilization." Although he announced that the United States was withdrawing its ambassador to Germany, he did not offer to help the thousands of Jews now trying desperately to leave the Third Reich.

Few Americans criticized Roosevelt's stand. According to a poll taken at the time, 57 percent of all Americans approved the recall. But 72 percent did not want more Jewish refugees in the United States and over half opposed aid to refugees who wished to settle elsewhere.

The Narrowing Circle

German leaders also reacted to Kristallnacht and the public outcry that followed. On November 10, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels called a press conference "to remove certain misunderstandings that appear to have their way into reports sent abroad." He warned that if Jews continued to spread "exaggerations of yesterday's happening, of the kind contained in the accounts and leading articles of the American press, then they would defeat their own ends, and they would be digging the graves of the Jews in Germany."

Most government officials, however, were opposed to Kristallnacht and other "undisciplined individual actions." Indeed, the Night of the Pogrom was the last occasion when Jews had to fear street violence in Germany. After Kristallnacht, writes Richard Rubenstein, "the hoodlums were banished and the bureaucrats took over." In the weeks that followed, key Nazi officials, led by Heinrich Himmler, saw to it that measures against the Jews were strictly "legal." On November 15, the bureaucracy excluded all Jewish children from state schools. By December 6, Jews could no longer walk or drive in certain parts of every major city. Jews who lived in those areas had to have a police permit to go home. Jews were advised to move and perhaps even exchange residences with "Aryans" who lived in "Jewish sections of town."

At about the same time, the government announced that Jews could no longer attend German universities. A few days later, Himmler prohibited them from owning or even driving a car. Jews were also banned from theaters, movie houses, concert halls, sports arenas, parks, and swimming pools. The Gestapo even went door-to-door confiscating radios owned by Jewish families.

CONNECTIONS...Questions for Classroom Discussion on "Taking a Stand"

- Each of the individuals quoted in this reading reached a decision as a result of the events of Kristallnacht. How did each make his or her decision? What values and beliefs shaped the choice each made?
- What were the short-term consequences of each choice described in the reading? The long-term consequences? For example, what do you think happened to non-Jews who resigned from the Nazi party? Tried to emigrate? Protested? What does each decision tell you about the person's "universe of obligation"? How were the choices open to each individual different from the ones he or she could

have made in 1933? In 1935?

- What did Melita Maschmann mean when she says “I constructed for myself a justification of the pogrom”? Why did she find it necessary to do so? What did she mean when she says as the years went by, she grew better and better “at forcing the memory of events like the pogrom out of my consciousness as quickly as possible”?
- Evaluate Goldschmidt’s explanation of why public outrage did not last long. Did the good outweigh the “other things”?

CONNECTIONS...Questions for Classroom Discussion on "World Responses"

- What did the Archbishop of Canterbury mean when he said, “There are times when the mere instincts of humanity make silence impossible”? What are those “instincts”? Do all humans have them? At what times is silence impossible? How do such times affect government responses today? Individual reactions? An ABC special about Bosnia, available from the Facing History Resource Center, explains why a few State Department officials resigned in protest of the failure of the United States government to take meaningful action to stop the killings in the Balkans.
- In 1776, Thomas Paine said, “He that would make his own liberty secure, must guard even his enemy from oppression, for if he violates this duty, he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.” How did he define his “universe of obligation”? Which of the following shared that definition: the archbishop, Chamberlain, the editor of La Lumière, or Roosevelt?
- What does the poll suggest about the way many Americans defined their “universe of obligation”? About the limits of people’s outrage?
- Compare the way people responded to Kristallnacht in Germany with responses abroad. What similarities do you notice? What differences seem more striking?
- What was the editor of La Lumière trying to tell people? How is his message similar to the one found in “The Hangman” (HHB, Chapter 4, Reading 23)? What is the key difference?

CONNECTIONS...Questions for Classroom Discussion on "The Narrowing Circle"

- A number of Jews who lived in Germany during those years spoke of a “narrowing circle.” What do you think they meant? Picture what your world would be like if you could no longer attend school, shop at the mall, see a movie, play ball in the park, or even watch TV.
- How significant was the decision to banish the “hoodlums” and let the bureaucrats take over? How was it like the actions the Nazis took after the Night of the Long Knives (HHB, Chapter 4, Reading 17)? How did it differ? How do you think the outcry over the events of Kristallnacht affected the decision? Was Kristallnacht a turning point for the Nazis?
- Shortly after Kristallnacht, the Nazis released the film Der Ewige Jude (HHB, Chapter 5, Reading 6). How might the two events be linked?
- The novel Friedrich by Hans Peter Richter describes the effects of Kristallnacht on two German families, one Christian and the other Jewish. Classroom sets of the books are available from the Facing History Resource Center.

¹ *Legacy of Silence* by Dan Bar-On (Harvard University Press), 1989, p. 1.

² *Account Rendered* by Melita Maschmann (Abelard-Schuman), 1965, pp. 56-57.

³ Quoted in *For the Soul of the People* by Victoria Barnett (Oxford University Press), 1992, p. 142.

⁴ , "The Pogrom," by Otto D. Tolischus (New York Times, 19 November, 1938). Copyright 1938 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

⁵ Quoted in *Kristallnacht; The Unleashing of the Holocaust* by Anthony Read and David Fisher (Peter Bedrick Books), 1989, p. 155.

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