



Kristallnacht (krees-tahl-nahkht): A Nationwide Pogrom, November 9–10, 1938 (<http://www.ushmm.org>)

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, throughout Germany, annexed Austria, and in areas of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia recently occupied by German troops.

Instigated primarily by Nazi Party officials and members of the SA (*Sturmabteilungen*: literally Assault Detachments, but commonly known as Storm Troopers) and Hitler Youth, *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.

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, a German embassy official stationed in Paris. 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 pogrom, intimated to the convened Nazi 'Old Guard' that 'World Jewry' had conspired to commit the assassination and 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."

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 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.

The rioters destroyed 267 synagogues throughout Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland. 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 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 the lives of at least 91 Jews between 9 and 10 November. Police records of the period document a high number of rapes and of suicides in the aftermath of the violence.

As the pogrom 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 obtained 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.

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 and imposed a punitive 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.

The events of *Kristallnacht* represented one of the most important turning points in National Socialist antisemitic policy. Historians have noted that after the pogrom, 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, moving eventually towards policies of forced emigration, and finally towards 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.