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Kristallnacht: Broken Glass and Broken Hearts

Kristallnacht, or “the Night of Broken Glass”, was a series of violent anti-Jewish attacks across Germany, parts of Austria, and other German occupied territories on November 9th and 10th, 1938. There were many factors leading up to this event, which had many devastating effects and is considered the start of the Holocaust. This essay will address the causes of Kristallnacht, Kristallnacht itself, the effects of Kristallnacht, and its significance.

There was a large background of anti-Semitism, or prejudice against Jews, in Germany, especially after Hitler’s rise to power. Although only a small percent of the German population was Jewish, the Nazis singled them out and blamed them for Germany’s defeat in World War I and the following economic effects. Many laws were passed to suppress German Jews, and concentration camps were built to house those considered a threat to the Nazi regime. In 1933, a law was passed limiting the number of Jewish students in public schools. Jews with first names of “non-Jewish origin” were forced to adopt additional names to identify them as Jewish. German Jews passports were declared invalid until they had been marked to identify the person as Jewish. The immediate cause of Kristallnacht was the assassination of Ernst vom Rath, a German diplomat, by Herschel Grynszpan on November 7th. Grynszpan was furious about the deportation of his parents a few days prior, which led to his actions. When he was arrested, Grynszpan cried, “Being a Jew is not a crime. I am not a dog. I have a right to live and the Jewish people have a right to exist on Earth. Wherever I have been, I have been chased like an animal.” The Nazi Party chose to use this event to launch a wave of anti-Semitic attacks.

When news of vom Rath's death reached the Nazi party, they were enraged. Joseph Goebbels, propaganda minister, delivered a speech blaming the Jews for vom Rath's death, and urging the public to lash out against them. Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues were plundered and destroyed. The rioters were given orders to not harm any non-Jewish German lives or property, and not to harm foreigners. Police were told to arrest as many Jews as possible, especially healthy, young men. "We do not give protection to Jews," one police chief stated, "Get out with these children or I'll shoot." 267 synagogues were destroyed. Many were burned while firefighters simply watched; only intervening to stop the fire from spreading to any non-Jewish buildings. About 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed and looted, and many Jewish cemeteries were vandalized and devastated. About 91 Jews died, and as many as 30,000 men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. According to one deportee, "Everyone was loaded onto wagons... Crying women and children, heartrending scenes... Women and children fainting, unconscious, incidents of death, faces as yellow as wax... Women and children half-dead."

Kristallnacht was a turning point in anti-Semitic politics. Afterwards, anti-Jewish policies increased dramatically. The next day Goebbels stated, "We shed not a tear for them." On the subject of the destroyed synagogues, he said, "They stood in the way long enough. We can use the space made free more usefully than as Jewish fortresses." Kristallnacht gave the Nazis the opportunity to eradicate Jews from the German public. They stated that the Jews were to blame for the event, and placed a fine on them for the destruction. Insurance payments for businesses were seized, leaving the owners forced to pay off the entire debt. Police reported a high number of rapes and suicides after Kristallnacht. Businesses were later taken from Jews, and they were barred from practicing most professions. Any Jewish children still in school were expelled. Jews

could no longer drive or go to “German” theaters. In his account of the aftermath of the event, Shlomo Wahrman said, “The store was boarded up... Our home no longer offered to us...Our family was now scattered in three different locations.” More and more Jews were sent to concentration camps afterwards. From an SS journal, the Nazis hoped to accomplish, “the actual and final end of Jewry in Germany, its complete destruction.”

In conclusion, Kristallnacht was a harrowing and horrible event. It is important to remember, not only in respect for those who died or lost their homes and businesses in the event itself, but for the many, many people that were sent to concentration camps, killed, or worse in the aftermath. Since Kristallnacht is considered the start of the Holocaust, the many horrendous and inhumane events that occurred afterwards owe part of their origin to it. This shows us that prejudice and hatred against another group of people is nothing but destructive, and we should be mindful that such events can, and most likely will, happen if we do not remain attentive and work to stop them.

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