

Kristallnacht - The Night of Broken Glass

Almost immediately upon assuming the Chancellorship of Germany, Hitler began promulgating legal actions against Germany's Jews. In 1933, he proclaimed a one-day boycott against Jewish shops, a law was passed against kosher butchering and Jewish children began experiencing restrictions in public schools. By 1935, the Nazis deprived Jews of German citizenship. By 1936, Jews were prohibited from participation in parliamentary elections and signs reading "Jews Not Welcome" appeared in many German cities. (Incidentally, these signs were taken down in the late summer in preparation for the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.)

In the first half of 1938, numerous laws were passed restricting Jewish economic activity and occupational opportunities. In July, 1938, a law was passed (effective January 1, 1939) requiring all Jews to carry identification cards. On October 28, seventeen thousand Jews of Polish citizenship, many of whom had been living in Germany for decades, were arrested and relocated across the Polish border. The Polish government refused to admit them so they were interned in "relocation camps" on the Polish frontier.

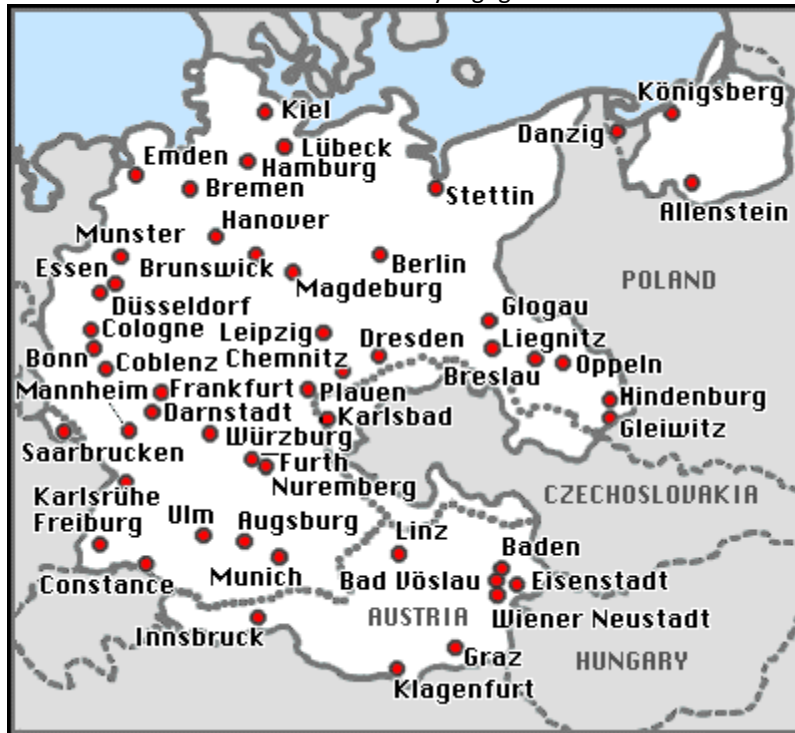
Among the deportees was Zindel Grynszpan, who had been born in western Poland and had moved to Hanover, where he established a small store, in 1911. On the night of October 27, Zindel Grynszpan and his family were forced out of their home by German police. His store and the family's possessions were confiscated and they were forced to move over the Polish border. Zindel Grynszpan's seventeen-year-old son, Herschel, was living with an uncle in Paris. When he received news of his family's expulsion, he went to the German embassy in Paris on November 7, intending to assassinate the German Ambassador to France. Upon discovering that the Ambassador was not in the embassy, he settled for a lesser official, Third Secretary Ernst vom Rath. Rath, was critically wounded and died two days later, on November 9. The assassination provided Goebbels, Hitler's Chief of Propaganda, with the excuse he needed to launch a pogrom against German Jews. Grynszpan's attack was interpreted by Goebbels as a conspiratorial attack by "International Jewry" against the Reich and, symbolically, against the Fuehrer himself. This pogrom has come to be called Kristallnacht, "the Night of Broken Glass."



Photo: Germans pass broken window of Jewish-owned shop.



Photo: The Berlin Great Synagogue in flames.



Map showing sites of synagogues destroyed on Kristallnacht (Map courtesy of [A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust](#))

On the nights of November 9 and 10, gangs of Nazi youth roamed through Jewish neighborhoods breaking windows of Jewish businesses and homes, burning synagogues and looting. In all 101 synagogues were destroyed and almost 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed. 26,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps, Jews were physically attacked and beaten and 91 died (Snyder, Louis L. Encyclopedia of the Third Reich. New York: Paragon House, 1989:201).

The official German position on these events, which were clearly orchestrated by Goebbels, was that they were spontaneous outbursts. The Fuehrer, Goebbels reported to Party officials in Munich, "has decided that such demonstrations are not to be prepared or organized by the party, but so far as they originate spontaneously, they are not to be discouraged either." (Conot, Robert E. Justice at Nuremberg. New York: Harper & Row, 1983:165)

Three days later, on November 12, Goering called a meeting of the top Nazi leadership to assess the damage done during the night and place responsibility for it. Present at the meeting were Goering, Goebbels, Reinhard Heydrich, Walter Funk and other ranking Nazi officials. The intent of this meeting was two-fold: to make the Jews responsible for Kristallnacht and to use the events of the preceding days as a rationale for promulgating a series of anti-Semitic laws which would, in effect, remove Jews from the German economy. An interpretive transcript of this meeting is provided by Robert Conot, Justice at Nuremberg, New York: Harper and Row, 1983:164-172):

"Gentlemen! Today's meeting is of a decisive nature," Goering announced. "I have received a letter written on the Fuehrer'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."

It was decided at the meeting that, since Jews were to blame for these events, they be held legally and financially responsible for the damages incurred by the pogrom. Accordingly, a "fine of 1 billion marks was levied for the slaying of Vom Rath, and 6 million marks paid by insurance companies for broken windows was to be given to the state coffers. (Snyder, Louis L. Encyclopedia of the Third Reich. New York: Paragon House, 1989:201).

Kristallnacht turns out to be a crucial turning point in German policy regarding the Jews and may be considered as the actual beginning of what is now called the Holocaust.