



Historical Empathy

## Kristallnacht: Prelude to the Holocaust

### Historical Context

On the night of November 9, 1938, a wave of violence broke out across Nazi Germany and Austria targeting Jewish homes, businesses, synagogues, and schools. This night became known as Kristallnacht, or the “Night of Broken Glass,” because of the shattered windows that covered the streets after the attacks. In just two days, over 250 synagogues were burned, more than 7,000 Jewish businesses were vandalized, and around 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The violence was triggered by the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a young Jewish man named Herschel Grynszpan, whose parents had been deported from Germany. The Nazi government, the German Reich, used this as an excuse to unleash coordinated attacks, although the plans had already been made. The attacks were carried out by Nazi stormtroopers and ordinary citizens, while police were ordered not to intervene. Kristallnacht marked a major turning point. Before this, Jews in Germany had faced discrimination, hateful propaganda, and legal restrictions. But Kristallnacht showed that physical violence, mass arrest, and destruction were now official Nazi policy. It was a warning of what was to come: the Holocaust, in which the Nazi regime murdered six million Jews. For many Jews, Kristallnacht made it clear that they were no longer safe in Germany. It also showed the world how far the Nazi regime was willing to go. Yet, most foreign governments did little in response. This silence would have deadly consequences. Kristallnacht was not just one night of terror; it was the start of the open persecution that would lead to genocide. Understanding this moment helps us see how hate, when unchecked, can quickly escalate into something far more dangerous.

### Connection to Habit

To understand Kristallnacht with historical empathy, students must imagine what it felt like to be a Jewish person in Germany on November 9, 1938: watching your synagogue burn, your neighbors break your shop windows, or your father dragged away by the police. While we now know Kristallnacht was a step toward the Holocaust, people living through it did not have that hindsight. Many were shocked, terrified, and unsure about what might come next. Practicing historical empathy means trying to grasp those emotions and fears, and not just judge from today’s perspective. It reminds us that history is lived by real people, often caught in moments of confusion, danger, and moral crisis, and that recognizing their humanity helps us better understand the choices they made and the world they lived in.

## Discussion Questions

- How did the government's role in Kristallnacht change the message being sent to both Jewish communities and the general German population?
- Why do you think the Nazi regime planned the attacks rather than allowing them to happen "spontaneously"?
- Imagine you were a Jewish teenager in Germany in 1938. How might Kristallnacht have changed how you felt about your safety, future, and neighbors?
- How might non-Jewish Germans have responded? What beliefs, pressures, or fears might have shaped their actions or silence?
- What does it mean to truly understand how people at the time felt, not just what happened to them?
- What message did Kristallnacht send to the Jewish population? What message did it send to the rest of the world?
- Why do you think Kristallnacht is considered a "turning point" toward the Holocaust?

## Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Printed or digital images of Kristallnacht:
  - [Burning Synagogue](#)
  - [Map of destroyed Synagogues](#)
  - [SS and Gestapo \(Secret State Police\) transferring Jewish males from local prisons to concentration camps](#)
  - [Jewish-owned shop destroyed](#)
  - [Public humiliation of Jewish women in Linz, Austria](#)
  - [Cleanup of looted Jewish businesses the day after the Kristallnacht](#)
- Notebook paper
- Chart paper or whiteboard

Step 1: Kristallnacht Historical Context [5 mins]

Give a brief overview of Kristallnacht, using the historical context. Remind students this was a coordinated attack carried out by Nazis against Jewish people, homes, businesses, and synagogues in November 1938. These images were taken during and after the attacks. They show real places, real destruction, and real people.

Step 2: Kristallnacht Investigative Folders [25 mins]

Provide students with the 6 images in a physical or digital folder. In pairs or small groups, students look through the images and answer reflection questions for each image.

Questions:

- What do you notice first in this image?
- Who are the people in the photo, and what might they be thinking or feeling?
- What story does this image tell about Kristallnacht?
- What questions does this photo raise for you?

Step 3: Historical Empathy Journal [15 mins]

Ask students to choose one image and write a short journal entry imagining they are living in the time and place shown in the image. Describe what you see, how you feel, and what you hope (or fear) will happen next writing as one of the following:

- A Jewish shop owner returning to their store
- A child watching their synagogue burn
- A non-Jewish neighbor witnessing the violence

Step 4: Whole Class Debrief [5-10 mins]

Facilitate a conversation using these guiding questions:

- What emotions came up while analyzing these images?
- How do these images help us understand the impact of Kristallnacht on individuals and communities?
- How does seeing these images change how we understand the lead up to the Holocaust?
- Are there examples today where groups are targeted or scapegoated in similar ways? What lessons can we take from Kristallnacht when thinking about our responsibilities in the present?

## Primary Source #1

### Burning Synagogue

Context: Hundreds of synagogues, such as this one, along with thousands of homes and stores were destroyed during Germany's Kristallnacht, the "Night of Broken Glass."



## Primary Source #2

### Map of destroyed Synagogues



## Primary Source #3

**SS and Gestapo (Secret State Police) transferring Jewish males  
from local prisons to concentration camps**



Source: [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia.](#)

## Primary Source #4

### Jewish-owned shop destroyed

Context: Hundreds of synagogues, such as this one, along with thousands of homes and stores were destroyed during Germany's Kristallnacht, the "Night of Broken Glass."



## Primary Source #5

### Public humiliation of Jewish women in Linz, Austria

Context: Jewish women in Linz, Austria are exhibited in public with a cardboard sign stating 'I have been excluded from the national community (Volksgemeinschaft)', during the anti-Jewish pogrom known as Kristallnacht, November 1938.



## Primary Source #6

### Cleanup of looted Jewish businesses the day after the Kristallnacht

Context: In this Nov. 10, 1938 file picture, a young man with a broom prepares to clear up the broken window glass from a Jewish shop in Berlin, the day after the "Kristallnacht" rampage. Nazis set fire to hundreds of synagogues, looted thousands of Jewish businesses, and attacked Jews in Germany and Austria

