

**Resource 18.4:****Readings: The Impact of Kristallnacht***Creating Context*

Review what you learned earlier in this course about the concept of *universe of obligation*, then consider the following statements:

- A government has the responsibility to protect the lives of people living within its borders, whether they are citizens or not.
- Nations have a moral obligation to accept refugees fleeing persecution.

Which do you agree with? Why or why not? Discuss your responses with your classmates.

This resource includes several readings describing the impact of Kristallnacht. These readings include accounts of the experiences of the victims of the pogrom, the range of choices that people faced when the violence broke out, the reactions of other nations, and the Nazi response to the public outcry after the events of November 9-10, 1938. Keep your answers to the questions above in mind as you explore the documents. Does the information in these readings strengthen your positions, or prompt you to reconsider them?

Knowing the following terms will improve your understanding of this reading:

**Reichmarks  
restitution**

**Heinrich Himmler  
bureaucrat**

**The Impact of Kristallnacht: Reading A**

(Excerpted from *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, pages 19–23.)

Twelve year-old Klaus Langer, a Jew from from Essen, Germany, wrote the following words in his diary as the violence of Kristallnacht unfolded:

**November 11, 1938**

The past three days brought significant changes in our lives. On November 7 a German [diplomat] was assassinated in Paris. He died two days later. The day following, on November 10. . . came the consequences. At three o'clock the synagogue and the Jewish youth center were put on fire. Then they began to destroy Jewish businesses. . . . Fires were started at single homes belonging to Jews. At six-thirty in the morning the Gestapo came to our home and arrested Father and Mother. Mother returned after one and a half hours. Dad remained and was put in prison. . . .

We . . . returned to our neighborhood by two o'clock . . . When I turned into the front yard I saw that the house was damaged. I walked on glass splinters. . . . I ran

into our apartment and found unbelievable destruction in every room. . . . My parents' instruments were destroyed, the dishes were broken, the windows were broken, furniture upturned, the desk was turned over, drawers and mirrors were broken, and the radio smashed. . . .

In the middle of the night, at 2:30 A.M., the Storm Troopers [also known as the Brownshirts] smashed windows and threw stones against store shutters. After a few minutes they demanded to be let into the house. Allegedly they were looking for weapons. After they found no weapons they left. After that no one was able to go back to sleep. . . . I shall never forget that night. . . . Books could be written about all that had happened and about which we now begin to learn more. But, I have to be careful. A new regulation was issued that the Jews in Germany had to pay one billion reichmarks for restitution. What for? For the damage the Nazis had done to the Jews in Germany. . . .

### **November 16, 1938**

A number of events occurred since my last entry. First, on November 15, I received a letter from school with an enclosed notice of dismissal. This became [unnecessary] since that same day an order was issued that prohibited Jews from attending public schools. . . .

### **December 3, 1938**

Taking up this diary again is not for any pleasant reason. Today, the day of National Solidarity, Jews were not allowed to go outside from noon until eight at night. Himmler . . . issued an order by which Jews had to carry photo identity cards. Jews also are not permitted to own driver's licenses. The Nazis will probably take radios and telephones from us. This is a horrible affair. Our radio was repaired and the damaged grand piano was fixed. I hope we can keep it. But one can never know with these scums.

## ***18.4 Reading A - Comprehension & Connections***

1. Langer was an eyewitness to the events of Kristallnacht. How does his account differ from the official Nazi government view described in Resource 18.3? Use evidence from both readings to describe the differences.
2. Many Jews saw Kristallnacht as a turning point. What is a turning point? What evidence from his diary suggests that Langer viewed Kristallnacht as a turning point?

## **The Impact of Kristallnacht: Reading B**

(Excerpted from “The Night of the Pogrom,” pp. 263-267 in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*)

Frederic Morton, a writer whose family fled from Vienna shortly after Kristallnacht, never forgot that night. He wrote:

The day began with a thudding through my pillow. Jolts waked me. Then, like an alarm clock, the doorbell rang. It was six in the morning. My father, my mother, my little brother and I all met in the foyer, all in our robes. We did not know yet exactly what. But we knew. We were Jews in Vienna in 1938. Everything in our lives, including our beds, stood on a cliff.

My father opened the door on Frau Eckel, the janitress.  
“They are down there...they are throwing things.” She turned away. Went on with her morning sweep. Her broom trembled.

We looked down into the courtyard. Pink-cheeked storm troopers chatted and whistled. Chopped-up furniture flew through the window.

The troopers fielded the pieces sportively, piled them into heaps. One hummed something from “The Merry Widow.”

“Franz! Run somewhere!” my mother said to my father.

By that time we’d gone to the window facing the street. At the house entrance two storm troopers lit cigarettes for each other. Their comrades were smashing the synagogue on the floor below us, tossing out a debris of Torahs and pews.

“Oh, my God!” my mother said.

Something overwhelming wanted to melt down my eyes. I couldn’t let it. All this might not be real as long as real tears did not touch my face. A crazy last-resort bargain with fate.

“All right,” my father said. “Meanwhile we get dressed.”

Meanwhile meant until they come up here. No other Jews lived in the building. It had no back door. But as long as I could keep my tears down, I could keep them down. While they were destroying down there, they would not come up here. As long as the shaking of the floor continued, the axe blows, the sledgehammer thuds, we might live.

I had gym for my first class. I laced on my sneakers. I knew I never would see school that morning. I didn’t care that I knew. I only cared not to cry. I tried to pour my entire mind into the lacing of my sneakers.

We met in the living room. We saw each other dressed with a normality made grotesque by the crashing of the perdition downstairs. It stopped. The shaking and the thudding stopped. Silence. A different sound. Heavy, booted steps ascending. I relaxed my sneakers.

My father had put on his hat. “Everybody come close to me,” he said. “My two sons, you put your hands on top of your heads.”

We put our hands on top of our heads, as hats. My father put his arms around all our shoulders, my mother’s, my brother’s, mine.

“Shema Yisroel,” my father said. “Repeat after me: Shema Yisroel Adonoy Elohenu Adonoy Ehod...” [“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One...”]

The doorbell rang. Once. Ever since the Anschluss, we’d rung our doorbell twice in quick succession to signal that this was a harmless ringing, not the dreaded one.

Now the dreaded ring had come.

“Hansi, you go,” my father said.

“No!” my mother said.

“Hansi is the only one they might not hurt on sight,” my father said. “Hansi, go.”

My brother, a tiny blond eight-year-old, an Aryan-looking doll, went. A minute later he returned. Behind him towered some 10 storm troopers with heavy pickaxes. They were young and bright-faced with excitement. Ten bridegrooms on their wedding day. One had freckles. How could a freckle-faced man kill us? The freckles kept me from crying.

“House search,” the leader said. “Don’t move.”

We all stood against the wall, except my father. He placed himself, hat still on, a foot in front of us.

They yanked out every drawer in every one of our chests and cupboards, and tossed each in the air. They let the cutlery jangle across the floor, the clothes scatter, and stepped over the mess to fling the next drawer. Their exuberance was amazing.

Amazing, that none of them raised an axe to split our skulls.

“We might be back,” the leader said. On the way out he threw our mother-of-pearl ashtray over his shoulder, like confetti. We did not speak or move or breathe until we heard their boots against the pavement.

“I am going to the office,” my father said. “Breitel might help.”

Breitel, the Reich commissar in my father’s costume-jewelry factory, was a “good” Nazi. Once he’d said we should come to him if there was trouble. My father left. My mother was crying, with relief, with terror; she cradled against herself my little stunned brother. I turned away from her. I swore I would do something other than cry.

I began to pick up clothes, when the doorbell rang again. It was my father.

“I have two minutes.”

“What?” my mother said. But she knew. His eyes had become glass. “There was another crew waiting for me downstairs. They gave me two minutes.”

Now I broke down. Now my father was the only one not crying. His eyes were blue glass, relentlessly dry. His kiss felt stubbly. He had not shaved this morning. After one more embrace with my mother he marched to the door, turned on his heel, called out.

“Fritz!” I went to him, sobbing.

“Stop!”

I couldn’t stop.

Harshly his hands came down on my shoulders.

“If I don’t come back – avenge me!”

He was gone. The fury of his fingers stung. It burned into my skin a sense of continuity against all odds. I stopped.

Four months later he rang our doorbell twice, skull shaven, skeletal, released from Dachau, somehow alive.

Forty years later, today, he is practicing the tango with my mother in Miami Beach. My little brother Hansi is chairman of the political science department at Queens College. I am a writer in America with an American family. We are atypically lucky. But to this day we all ring our American doorbells twice.<sup>4</sup>

***18.4 Reading B - Comprehension & Connections***

1. Morton was an eyewitness to the events of Kristallnacht. How does his account differ from the official Nazi government view described in Resource 18.3? Use evidence from both readings to describe the differences.
2. Why was it so important to Morton to avoid crying? What effect does this detail have on the impact of his story?
3. Morton writes, “Everything in our lives, including our beds, stood on a cliff.” What does he mean? What signs does he provide in his account that indicate that Kristallnacht is a turning point?

## **The Impact of Kristallnacht: Reading C**

(Excerpted from “Taking a Stand,” pp. 268-269 in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*. An [extended and enhanced version of this reading](#) is available on the Facing History & Ourselves website.)

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.<sup>5</sup>

***18.4 Part C - Comprehension & Connections***

1. Summarize the dilemma that Andre and his family faced. How did they make their decisions? Why do you think the father let Andre make the choice? What values and beliefs shaped their choices?
2. What opportunities and benefits would Andre, and others faced with the same choice, have experienced if he decided to join with others throwing stones?
3. What were the short-term consequences of Andre's choice? What were the long-term consequences? What does Andre and his family's decision tell you about their "circle of responsibility"?



### The Impact of Kristallnacht: Reading D

(Excerpted from “Taking a Stand,” pp. 268-269 in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*. An [extended and enhanced version of this reading](#) is available on the Facing History & Ourselves website.)

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.’”<sup>7</sup>

#### 18.4 Part D - Comprehension & Connections

1. Summarize the dilemma that Melita Maschmann faced. How did she make her decision? What values and beliefs shaped her choices?
2. What is Maschmann’s explanation for how she lived with her choice?
3. What opportunities and benefits would be experienced by those Germans who chose to participate in the violence of Kristallnacht or remain silent about it?
4. 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 responsibility"?

5. Evaluate Goldschmidt's explanation of why public outrage did not last long. Did the good outweigh the "other things"?

## The Impact of Kristallnacht: Reading E

(Excerpted from “World Responses,” pp. 270-272 in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*)

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.<sup>8</sup>

### 18.4 Part E - Comprehension & Connections

1. How would you evaluate the beginning of Tolischus’s report? Is it accurate? Is it objective? What is the role of a journalist in reporting atrocities to the public? What are a journalist’s most important responsibilities?
2. How does Tolischus’s use of the word *vengeance* affect the impact of his story?
3. If you were a reporter tasked with finishing this story, what additional information would you include? Who would you interview? What perspectives on these events would you want to include?

## The Impact of Kristallnacht: Reading F

(Excerpted from “World Responses,” pp. 270-272 in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*)

People everywhere were outraged. As the Archbishop of Canterbury (the leader of the Church of England), Cosmo Gordon Lang, wrote in a letter to the editor of the *New York 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 (the agreement between European nations that allowed Germany to annex the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia), 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.’”<sup>9</sup>

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.

### 18.4 Part F - Comprehension & Connections

1. How did England, France, and the United States respond to the events of Kristallnacht. What reasons did they give for their action or inaction?

2. Which of the responses to Kristallnacht from other nations are most striking to you? Why? Use specific evidence from the reading to explain your answers.
3. Do you think other nations have a responsibility to speak out when a government harms those who live within its borders? Do other nations have a responsibility to do more than speak out? What other options do other nations have?
4. 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?
5. What does the word *civilization* mean in the context of President Roosevelt’s statement. What does his use of the word imply about how he viewed the violence in Germany?
6. What does the poll suggest about the way many Americans defined their country’s universe of obligation? What does it suggest about the limits of people’s outrage?
7. Compare the way people responded to Kristallnacht in Germany with responses abroad. What similarities do you notice? What differences seem more striking?

## The Impact of Kristallnacht: Reading G

(Excerpted from “The Narrowing Circle,” pp. 272-273 in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*)

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.

### ***18.4 Part E - Comprehension & Connections***

1. A number of Jews who lived in Germany in the late 1930’s spoke of a “narrowing circle.” What do you think they meant? What evidence is there that their “circle” was narrowing?
2. What does Rubenstein mean by the statement that “the hoodlums were banished and the bureaucrats took over”? What are hoodlums and bureaucrats? What power does each group have to change society or create fear?
3. How significant was the decision to banish the “hoodlums” and let the bureaucrats take over? How do you think the outcry over the events of Kristallnacht affected the decision? Was Kristallnacht a turning point for the Nazis?