

## Opportunism during Kristallnacht

**Directions:** Read the source in your group, then answer the questions that follow.

Despite Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller's instructions to state police that plundering be held to a minimum, the theft of goods, property, and money from Jews by German police, SS members, and civilians amid the chaos of Kristallnacht was widespread.

German newspapers reported the looting of and theft from Jewish-owned businesses. According to Berlin's *Daily Herald* newspaper, 'The great shopping centers looked as though they had suffered an air raid ... Showcases were torn from the walls, furniture broken, electric signs smashed to fragments.' The *News Chronicle* newspaper, also from Berlin, reported looters 'smashing with peculiar care the windows of jewellery shops and, sniggering, stuffing into their pockets the trinkets and necklaces that fell on the pavements'.<sup>1</sup>

According to historian Martin Gilbert, when a British reporter asked a Nazi official about the widespread theft of goods from Jewish businesses during Kristallnacht in Vienna, the official responded:

*"We began seizing goods from Jewish shops because sooner or later they would have been nationalised [confiscated by the government] anyway." The goods thus seized, the official added, "will be used to compensate us for at least part of the damage which the Jews have been doing for years to the German people."*<sup>2</sup>

Gilbert also describes how Kurt Fuchsl's family lost their home.

*Seven-year-old Kurt Fuchsl was bewildered by the events of Kristallnacht, and by being forced to leave home with his family early on the morning of November 10. He later recalled: "What happened, as recounted to me by my Mother, was that an interior decorator had taken a picture of our beautiful living room and displayed the picture of our apartment in his shop window. A Frau [Mrs] Januba saw the picture and heard that we were Jewish. She came around to the apartment and asked if it was for sale. She was told it wasn't, but a few days later, on the morning of Kristallnacht, she came back with some officers and said, 'This apartment is now mine.' She showed a piece of paper with a swastika stamped on it and told us that we would have to leave by six that evening." Kurt Fuchsl's mother protested to the officers who were accompanying Frau Januba that she had a sick child at home who was already asleep. "All right," they told her, "but you have to get out by six in the morning."*<sup>3</sup>

German officials also stole cash from Jewish businesses and families. Two weeks after Kristallnacht, Margarete Drexler wrote the following letter to the Gestapo, requesting the return of the money officials had taken from her home in Mannheim, Germany:

*Mannheim, 24 November 1938*

*Margarete Drexler, Landau Pfalz Suedring St. 10*

*To the Secret State Police Landau (Pfalz) The sum of 900 Marks in cash was confiscated from me in the course of the action of 10 November. I herewith request to act for the return of my money, as I need it urgently for me and my child's livelihood. I hope that my request will be granted, as my husband died as a result of his injuries during the war – he fought and died for his fatherland with extreme courage – and I am left without any income. Until recent years you could have found a photo of my husband on the wall next to the picture of Generalfeldmarschall [Paul] von Hindenburg in the canteen of the 23 Infantry regiment in Landau. This was done to honour his high military performance. His medals and decorations prove that he fought with great courage and honour. He received: The Iron Cross First Class, The Iron Cross Second Class, The Military Order of Merit Fourth Class with swords. The Military Order of Sanitation 2 class with a blue-white ribbon. This ribbon*

<sup>1</sup> M. Gilbert, *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 46–7. <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

*is usually bestowed only upon recipients of the Max Joseph Order, which accepts only members of the nobility. I can only hope that as a widow of such a man, so honoured by his country, my request for the return of my property will not be in vain.*

*With German greetings,*

*(signed) Frau Margarete Drexler*

*Widow of reserve staff surgeon*

*Dr. Hermann Drexler*

In 1940, Drexler was arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp in France, where she died.

- 1. Select a person from the source to focus on.**
  - How did this person react to Kristallnacht?
  - What choices did they make?
  - What factors may have motivated this person and/or influenced their choices?
  - How might this person's universe of obligation have influenced their choices?
  - Was this person a bystander, upstander, perpetrator or victim?
- 2. Repeat this process, answering the questions on another person from the source.**
- 3. What do these sources suggest about the variety of ways humans might respond to fear and crisis?**
- 4. What roles can people who are not targeted by violence and terror play in perpetuating or preventing injustice?**

<sup>4</sup> Yad Vashem, 'Looting during "Crystal Night"', accessed 29 June 2016.

## A Family Responds to Kristallnacht

**Directions:** Read the source in your group, then answer the questions that follow.

Marie Kahle (a teacher), her husband (a university professor and Lutheran pastor), and their sons witnessed the events of Kristallnacht in the city of Bonn and the effects those events had on their Jewish neighbours and colleagues. Marie Kahle wrote about the choices she and her family made the next day:

*On 10 November, 1938, at 11:30 in the morning, the wife of a Jewish colleague came to me and reported that both the synagogues in Bonn had been set on fire and that SS men had destroyed the Jewish shops, to which I replied: "That can't be true!" She gave me a manuscript to keep, her husband's life work. Then one of my sons brought the same news.*

*My third son immediately went, without my knowing it, to a Jewish clockmaker's shop, helped the man's wife hide a few things and brought home a chest with the most valuable jewelry and time-pieces. Then he went to a chocolate shop, warned the owner and helped her move tea, coffee, cocoa, etc. to a room in the very back of the building. While three SS men were destroying everything in the front of the shop, he slipped out the back door with a suitcase full of securities and rode home with it on his bicycle. Later on, he spent weeks selling these hidden things to our acquaintances and thus made money for the two shop owners that the Gestapo knew nothing about. A Jewish colleague of my husband's stayed with us all day long on 10 November and thus avoided being arrested.*

*From 11 November on, my sons worked furiously to help the Jewish shopkeepers clear out their shops. I couldn't take part in this myself because I did not want to endanger my husband's position. I could only visit the poor people. During one of these visits, my eldest son and I were surprised by a policeman, who wrote down my name. The consequence was a newspaper article ... for 17 November 1938 headed "This is a betrayal of the people: Frau Kahle and her son help the Jewess Goldstein clear out."*

*On the basis of this newspaper article, my husband was immediately suspended and he was forbidden to enter ... the university buildings. My eldest son was also forbidden to enter the university. He was convicted by a disciplinary court. ... During the night, our house was attacked. Window panes were broken, etc. ... The police came a short time later but went away again immediately. One of the policemen advised me to look out into the street: there, we found written in large red letters on the pavement: "Traitors to the People! Jew-lovers!" We washed the writing away with turpentine.*

*However, since the people were constantly coming back in their car, I openly rode away on my bicycle. I did not want to be beaten to death in front of my children and I was also only a danger to my family. I found shelter in a small Catholic convent, where the nuns were kind enough to look after me and my youngest child. During the interrogation by the Gestapo a few days later, I was asked whether I knew the license number of the car whose occupants had made the attack. When I said "no", I was released. As I came out of the Gestapo building, this same car stood in front of the door. I even recognized the driver.*

*Particularly important in this whole period was a visit in 1939 by a well-known neurologist who, as Reich Education Director ... was well up on Jewish matters. He told me, on two afternoons when we were alone, what would happen to me and my family along the lines of "Jews and friends of Jews must be exterminated. We are exterminating friends of Jews and all their offspring." Then he said that I could not be saved, but my family could. When I asked what I should do, he gave his answer in the form of a couple of stories in which the wife committed suicide and thereby saved her family. Then he asked: "How much Veronal [a sleeping pill] do you have?" When I answered, "Only two grams," he wrote me a prescription for the quantity that I was lacking. I carried the Veronal around with me for a few days, but then decided not to die, but instead to try to escape abroad with my family.*

*In four months, only three of my husband's colleagues dared to visit us. I was not allowed to go out during the day. When one evening I met a colleague's wife and complained that no friends or acquaintances had dared to visit me, she said: "That's not cowardice; we are just facing facts."<sup>5</sup>*

Soon after, the family left Germany.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Kahle, in *The Night of Broken Glass: Eyewitness Accounts of Kristallnacht*, ed. U. Gerhardt and T. Karlauf (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 88–90. Reproduced by permission from Polity Press.

## A Visitor's Perspective on Kristallnacht

**Directions:** Read the source in your group, then answer the questions that follow.

René Juvet, a Swiss merchant, was visiting friends in the countryside during the events of Kristallnacht. The next morning he drove to the town of Bayreuth, where he saw people watching as houses burnt to the ground. At one point, he got out of his car to take a closer look at a crowd gathered in front of a warehouse where dozens of Jews were being held.

*I was reluctant to add myself to the assembled crowd but I had to see with my own eyes what was happening there. Through the great windows you could see perhaps fifty people in a bleak, empty hall. Most of them stood against the wall, staring gloomily, a few walked restlessly about, others were sitting—in spite of the severe cold—on the bare floor. Almost all of them, incidentally, were inadequately dressed; some only had thrown on a topcoat over their nightclothes. The SA people who had picked them up during the night had apparently not allowed them time to put on more clothing. Compared to what happened later, this was only a small beginning.*

At the end of his description of Kristallnacht, Juvet writes:

*To the credit of my [non-Jewish German colleagues] I can report that they—with the exception of Neder, who took part in the operation in his role as an SA Führer—disapproved of the excesses. Some more, others less. Waldmeyer said nothing, but he was very thoughtful in ensuing days; Hoffmann, who could almost count himself as one of the old guard, made no attempt to conceal his horror from me. I also heard that the workers were outraged. ...*

*A little while after this I met our Nuremberg representative, a harmless and industrious person. He was a member of the SA but was, by chance, kept away from home that evening. ...*

*"I am happy I was not in Nuremberg that evening, it certainly would have rubbed me the wrong way," said our representative.*

*I asked him whether he would have taken part if he had been there. "Of course," he said, "orders are orders." His words clarified a whole lot of things for me.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> R. Juvet, 'Kristallnacht', in *Travels in the Reich, 1933–1945: Foreign Authors Report from Germany*, ed. O. Lubrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 176–8.