

READING

World Responses to Kristallnacht

Newspapers around the world reported the events of Kristallnacht. The following story by Otto D. Tolischus of the *New York Times* was typical of many.

A wave of destruction, looting and incendiaries [fires] unparalleled in Germany since the Thirty Years War and in Europe generally since the Bolshevist 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 vom Rath, third secretary of the German 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 burning shops and synagogues. Although shop fires were quickly extinguished, synagogue fires were merely kept from spreading to adjoining buildings.¹

People everywhere were outraged. As the archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, wrote in a November 12 letter to the editor of the *London 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 such protests might jeopardize the agreement concerning the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia.

Leaders in Britain and France were very careful in how they responded. When members of Britain’s Parliament asked Neville Chamberlain to condemn the pogrom, he simply said that newspaper reports were “substantially correct.” He also expressed “deep and widespread

¹ Otto D. Tolischus, “The Pogrom,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1938.

sympathy" for those who were "to suffer so severely" for the "senseless crime committed in Paris."²

Similar comments from French leaders 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.'"³

Condemnation from leaders in the United States was broad-based and widespread. Clergymen of all faiths spoke out against the burning of synagogues; politicians of all parties—Republicans and Democrats, isolationists and interventionists—denounced the violence against Jews and their houses of worship. The only world leader to take a stand was President Franklin D. Roosevelt. On November 15, six days after the pogrom, 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."

But Roosevelt's response had to take into account widespread isolationist and antisemitic feelings in his administration, in Congress, and in the country. At his press conference, Roosevelt announced that the United States was withdrawing its ambassador to Germany, but he did not offer to help the thousands of Jews who were trying desperately to leave the Third Reich.

Despite the outrage against the violence in Germany, there was not much support for lifting or modifying immigration restrictions. Since the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929, Americans had been worried about unemployment and the economy and coping with labor unrest. They had been unwilling to confront racism in their own country and fearful of being drawn into foreign conflicts in which they felt their country had no interest. All these matters seemed much more important than the problem of stateless Jews in Europe. Although many were willing to accept a few famous writers, artists, and scientists who happened to be Jews, they were not willing to let in thousands of other Jews.

Few Americans were violently antisemitic, but many felt that Jews should be "kept in their place." Enforcement of the nation's immigration laws reflected these views. The United States could

² "Chamberlain Deplores Nazi Pogroms; Acts to Aid British Jews in Reich," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, November 14, 1938, accessed April 26, 2016.

³ Quoted in Anthony Read and David Fisher, *Kristallnacht: The Unleashing of the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1989), 155.

legally admit 27,000 immigrants from Germany each year. Yet in 1934, the State Department had allowed only about 5,000 to enter the country. Approximately 6,000 were permitted to enter in 1935 and less than 11,000 in 1936.

In February 1939, Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts sponsored a bill based on a popular British program. Between 1938 and 1939, the British admitted 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children from “Greater Germany” as part of a program known as the Kindertransport (children’s transport). Wagner and Rogers wanted Congress to temporarily admit 20,000 Jewish children until it was safe for them to return home. The first 10,000 would arrive in 1939 and the remaining 10,000 in 1940. Most of these children were too young to work, so they would not take away jobs from Americans. Furthermore, their stay would not cost taxpayers a penny because various Jewish groups had agreed to assume financial responsibility for the children.

Yet the bill encountered strong opposition. In January 1939, Gallup, a polling organization, began asking Americans the following question: “It has been proposed to bring to this country 10,000 refugee children from Germany—most of them Jewish—to be taken care of in American homes. Should the government permit these children to come in?”⁴ In response, 61% said that the government should not permit the children to come into the country, 30% said that the children should be permitted to come, and 9% said that they had no opinion.⁵

Why, some opponents asked, were Christian children from countries threatened by the Nazis or Chinese children (Japan had invaded China in 1935) not included? Others made openly antisemitic remarks. The wife of the US commissioner of immigration (and the cousin of President Roosevelt) warned that those “20,000 charming children would all too soon grow into 20,000 ugly adults.”⁶ The bill was never passed.

In the summer of 1940, after World War II had begun and the Germans were bombing British cities, the US Congress did vote to accept thousands of British children, mostly non-Jewish, into the country.⁷

⁴ Ishaan Tharoor, “What Americans thought of Jewish refugees on the eve of World War II,” *Washington Post*, November 17, 2015, accessed June 29, 2016.

⁵ Frank Newport, “Historical Review: Americans’ Views on Refugees Coming to U.S.,” Gallup, last modified November 19, 2015, accessed June 29, 2016.

⁶ Marc Lee Raphael, *Judaism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 297.

⁷ Judith Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise: Rescue and Resettlement of Jewish Refugee Children in the United States, 1934–1945* (Juneau, AK: Denali Press, 1990), 34, 38.

MAYFLOWER



Plea for Help for Europe's Jews

In the *Chicago Daily News* for November 23, 1938, the cartoonist Cecil Jensen pleaded for world leaders to help Europe's Jews.

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Connection Questions

1. How do foreign leaders' responses to Kristallnacht compare to their responses to Germany's aggressive expansion into Austria and the Sudetenland?
2. How did the editor of *La Lumière* describe the difference between the response to Kristallnacht and the response to other nations' massacres?
3. How would you interpret the Gallup poll taken in January 1939? What does it suggest about the United States' universe of obligation at the time?
4. The archbishop of Canterbury wrote, "There are times when the mere instincts of humanity make silence impossible." What does he mean by "the mere instincts of humanity"? When are those times?
5. Does a nation have the right and the responsibility to interfere in the internal events of another country when it believes those events are wrong?