On the night of November 9, 1938, the sounds of breaking glass shattered the air in cities throughout Germany while fires across the country devoured synagogues and Jewish institutions. By the end of the rampage, gangs of Nazi storm troopers had destroyed 7,000 Jewish businesses, set fire to more than 900 synagogues, killed 91 Jews and deported some 30,000 Jewish men to concentration camps. In a report back to the State Department a few days later, a U.S official in Leipzig described what he saw of the atrocities. "Having demolished dwellings and hurled most of the moveable effects to the streets," he wrote, "the insatiably sadistic perpetrators threw many of the trembling inmates into a small stream that flows through the zoological park, commanding horrified spectators to spit at them, defile them with mud and jeer at their plight."

An incident several days earlier had given the Nazi authorities an excuse to instigate the violence. On November 7th, a 17-year-old Polish Jewish student named Hershel Grynszpan had shot Ernst vom Rath, the Third Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris. Grynszpan, enraged by the deportation of his parents to Poland from Hanover, Germany, where they had lived since 1914, hoped that his dramatic action would alert the world to the ominous plight of Europe's Jews. When the French police arrested Grynszpan, he sobbed: "Being a Jew is not a crime. I am not a dog. I have a right to live and the Jewish people have a right to exist on earth. Wherever I
have been I have been chased like an animal." The assassination attempt was successful; vom Rath died on November 9th.

News of the Third Secretary's death reached the leading figures of the Nazi party later that day while they were attending a dinner in Munich. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels delivered an inflammatory speech, urging the assembled crowd to take to the streets. The message was clear: The Jews of Germany would have to pay for vom Rath's death. Later that night Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Security Service, sent a series of orders to all State Police offices: Business establishments and homes of Jews could be destroyed but not looted; German life and property should not be jeopardized; and as soon as the events of the night permitted, officers should arrest as many Jews, particularly wealthy ones, as the local jails would hold.

The following day Goebbels announced, "We shed not a tear for them [the Jews]." He went on to comment on the destruction of synagogues saying, "They stood in the way long enough. We can use the space made free more usefully than as Jewish fortresses."

"Kristallnacht" provided the Nazi government with an opportunity at last to totally remove Jews from German public life. It was the culminating event in a series of anti-Semitic policies set in place since Hitler took power in 1933. Within a week, the Nazis had circulated a letter declaring that Jewish businesses could not be reopened unless they were to be managed by non-Jews. On November 15th, Jewish children were barred from attending school, and shortly afterwards the Nazis issued the "Decree on Eliminating the Jews from German Economic Life," which prohibited Jews from selling goods or services anywhere, from engaging in crafts work, from serving as the managers of any firms, and from being members of cooperatives. In addition, the Nazis determined that the Jews should be liable for the damages caused during "Kristallnacht." "The Decree on the Penalty Payment by Jews Who Are German Subjects" also imposed a one-billion mark fine on the Jewish community, supposedly an indemnity for the death of vom Rath.

Although the atrocities perpetrated during the Night of Broken Glass did arouse outrage in Western Europe and the United States, little concrete action was taken to help the Jews of Germany. At a press conference on November 15th, President Roosevelt said, "The news of the past few days from Germany has deeply shocked public opinion in the United States... I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a 20th century civilization." The president also instructed that the 12,000-15,000 refugees already in the U.S. on temporary visitor visas could remain in the country indefinitely.