

## READING

## A Visitor's Perspective on Kristallnacht

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 burned 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>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> René Juvet, "Kristallnacht," in *Travels in the Reich, 1933–1945: Foreign Authors Report from Germany*, ed. Oliver Lubrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 176–78.

## Connection Questions

1. What words and phrases do René Juvet and his acquaintances use to describe Kristallnacht? What attitudes does their language convey?
2. An SA member tells Juvet that even though he did not like the violence on Kristallnacht, he would have participated if called upon to do so, because “orders are orders.” What do you think Juvet means by writing, “His words clarified a whole lot of things for me”? What did the SA man’s words clarify for Juvet? What do the SA man’s words suggest to you? How might they help us understand why some people chose to participate?
3. Why might people participate in violence even if they don’t fully support its goals?