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“Women want some chase, some drama, some intrigue.”

Jen Kim

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BLOGS

One Among Many

The self in social context

by [Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.](#)



Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. [See full bio](#)

Do the right thing

Doing one's duty as a counterpoint to destructive obedience

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In the world's collective [memory](#), Thursday, November 9th, 1938, will live in infamy. Late in the evening, the so-called Reichskristallnacht began with attacks by the SA, the SS, and many civilians on Jewish life in Germany. According to [Wikipedia](#), "91 Jews were murdered and 25,000 to 30,000 were arrested and placed in [concentration](#) camps. 267 synagogues were destroyed and thousands of homes and businesses were ransacked."

The Nazi regime sought to portray the pogrom as a spontaneous eruption of the nation's outrage against the Jews, although few were fooled by this ploy. It was evident that the pogrom was carefully planned and coordinated on a grand scale. The prominent presence of the brownshirts refuted the claim of spontaneous mob action.

Most Germans did nothing to stop the violence and many came into the streets to watch the spectacle, adding the infamy of apathy and voyeurism to that of the violence itself. I will not speculate here how easy or difficult it would have been for individual civilians or small groups of individuals to intervene by putting out fires or confronting a uniformed militia. I suspect, however, that it is all too easy to overestimate the individual's opportunities to help.

Putting out fires was the job of the fire departments. Most fire departments did appear on the scene, but instead of putting out the flames, they idly stood by, simply making sure that the fires did not spread to non-Jewish buildings.



This is where Wilhelm Krützfeld (see photo) comes in. Wilhelm Krützfeld was the chief of police precinct number 16, Hackescher Markt, in the center of Berlin. Within his precinct lay the largest synagogue of the country, the beautiful New Synagogue (see photo). The new Synagogue had been built in the 1880s in the Moorish style. For its splendor, Kaiser Wilhelm I had granted it protection under the law.

Oberleutnant Krützfeld knew this and he had the Kaiser's document. He also knew what the Nazis were up to. Shortly after the flames started devouring the synagogue's vestibule, Krützfeld and some of his men showed up. His pistol in one hand and the Kaiser's grant in the other, he demanded that the SA leave the building. They did. He then called the fire department and demanded that they put out the fire. They did.

In my book, Krützfeld is a hero. Note that he doesn't fit the folk psychological prototype of a hero, who runs into a burning house to save someone else's baby. Krützfeld was an officer of the law, a law that was still the law of the land. Arson was illegal and Krützfeld acted accordingly. We do not know whether Krützfeld had a sense of whether he was exposing himself to censure or even danger. He must have calculated, correctly as it turned out, that his pistol and the Kaiser's grant would win the day. The next day, the President of the Berlin police, Graf von Helldorf, a member of the SA, summoned him to his office to explain himself. Helldorf chewed Krützfeld out, but did not [discipline](#) him. Interestingly,

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Helldorf himself was later implicated in the July 20, 1944, plot against Hitler ("Operation Valkyrie").

Krützfeld proved that doing one's duty, being obedient in other words, can be a source of good. After Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt, and Stanley Milgram, the dominant theory has been that obedience is a deadly force. Surely, it can be, but it doesn't have to be. Obedience is a process. Its result depends on the kind of authority it serves. Many [altruists](#) seem to understand this when they claim that they were "only" doing their duty. This duty does not need to be legally coded, as in Krützfeld's case; it may simply be a person's duty as a human being as the person understands it. Krützfeld's case is interesting because he understood the law, he anticipated what his opponents would do, and he knew the extent of his own powers. Then he used them accordingly. He was not only a [moral](#) man, but also a rational man.

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