Starting on November 9th, 1938, lasting for two days, a series of violent anti-Semitic attacks took place in Germany. The attacks, carried out by Adolf Hitler’s SA, a paramilitary branch of the Nazi Party, along with German civilians, were a culmination of growing anti-Semitic sentiments and policies. Almost 100 Jews were killed and about 30,000 were sent to concentration camps. Approximately 1,000 synagogues were destroyed along with 7,000 Jewish-owned businesses. It became clear after this series of attacks, which became known as “Kristallnacht” or “Night of broken glass”, that Jews in Germany were in serious trouble.

From the start of Hitler’s reign, Jews in Nazi territories were in danger. As a historically oppressed group, Jews were an easy scapegoat for the enormous economic problems and massive inflation afflicting the German people after their defeat in World War I. Soon after Hitler came to power, Jews were no longer full citizens, with bans on the ability to work in civil service. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws prevented Jews from marrying or hiring non-Jews. In 1938, Germany began to expel foreign-born Jews living in its borders. When Herschel Gyrnszpan, a teenager living in Paris at the time, first heard news of his family’s expulsion, he went to the German embassy in Paris and shot a Nazi official. After nearly two weeks, on November 9, 1938, the official finally died. Knowing that the inevitable outcry against this assassination was a golden opportunity to further advance his anti-Semitic agenda, Hitler commanded Nazi officials to start uprisings against Jews, making them appear to be undertaken by the common citizens. This led to the terrible riots across Germany that left the Jewish people even more isolated and oppressed than ever before. Kristallnacht began the wide-scale implementation of concentration camps which, by the end of World War II, left 11 million dead.

The international response to Kristallnacht consisted of some condemnation but ultimately little political action toward Nazi Germany. The United States withdrew their
ambassador from Germany, and other nations verbally protested. The United Kingdom developed a program that accepted Jewish refugee children from Germany. Relations between Germany and the rest of the world became severed after Kristallnacht. These actions, while expressing the standpoints of the respective nations on German anti-Semitism, had little potential for producing tangible changes in Nazi policy. No harsh measures, such as economic sanctions, were enacted to dissuade Germany from persecuting Jews and other minorities. A disincentive for continuing its awful oppression of Jews was never handed to Germany by the international community.

What may have been responsible for this mild response to Germany was the absence of citizen outcries and pressure on their governments. People all over the world, including in Germany, were undoubtedly appalled by Kristallnacht. Had politicians felt pressure to act, further atrocities may have been prevented. However, this pressure was entirely non-existent. While minor government actions were taken, there were literally no civilian protests in Europe or the United States. Germany continued its atrocious treatment of Jews and other minority groups, culminating in the Holocaust during World War II.

On the other side of the globe, another minority group suffered woes similar to those faced by German Jews in the early 1930s. Australia, which was first colonized by the United Kingdom in the early 1800s, had a history of mistreatment toward its native population. The Aborigines, Australian natives, had not always been minorities: their population drastically declined during the century and a half following colonization, due to the diseases brought by the European settlers, and forced removal of children from their tribes.

To make matters worse, Australian society treated the Aborigines terribly. They were considered to be a small step up from primates in mental development, and were hardly deemed human. The arguments justifying the oppression of Aborigines were strikingly similar to those used by Nazi Germany regarding its treatment of Jews. Legislation reflected this feeling: few Aborigines were granted citizenship, and these few had to carry papers at all times to verify it. Most Aborigines, essentially serfs, were forced to work on farms, receiving abysmal wages and facing strong limits on the ability to travel freely. Many were even massacred by white Australians.
While most Australian Aborigines were illiterate, making it nearly impossible for them to protest their treatment, some fought for increased rights and equality for their people. William Cooper, an educated Aborigine from southwestern Australia, was one such individual. Working mostly on farms throughout his life, he took adult literacy classes and read often. In 1934, at the age of 73, Cooper cofounded the Australian Aborigines’ League, an organization created to campaign for rights of the indigenous peoples of Australia. Once started, he distributed a petition demanding greater land rights and representation in the Australian parliament for indigenous peoples. Nineteen-thirty-eight was probably the most politically active year of Cooper’s life. His petition, having received almost 2,000 signatures, was sent to the Australian Prime Minister in 1938. Sadly, Cooper’s demands for equality were left unconsidered by the Australian government. January 26, 1938, marked the 150th Australia Day commemorating the arrival of the British in Australia. On this day, William Cooper, along with the Australian Aborigines’ League and other Aboriginal rights groups, protested the Australian government’s oppression of its native population. A march was led through Sydney in what became known as the “Day of Mourning.” Every year since 1938, protests have been held on Australia Day.

As an activist for human rights, William Cooper cared not only about the plight of his fellow Aborigines but also for other ethnic groups across the globe. When news of Kristallnacht travelled throughout the world, Cooper was outraged. As a witness of decades of discrimination and hatred towards his own ethnic group, he definitely understood the oppression the Jews faced and sympathized with their hardship. On December 6, 1938, less than a month after Kristallnacht, 77 year-old Cooper marched with the Australian Aborigines’ League to the German consulate in Melbourne, then the capital of Australia, with a petition condemning Kristallnacht as “cruel persecution” of the German Jews. Although it was not accepted by the consul-general, D.W. Drechsler, according to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, “this was the only known private protest anywhere in the world against the Nazi regime following Kristallnacht.”

Though William Cooper’s efforts went unnoticed for decades, he has recently received recognition for his courageous actions. In 2010, after a lengthy process of verifying his achievements, Yad Vashem created a memorial and garden in Cooper’s name. Dr. David Silberklang, a historian at Yad Vashem, remarked, “He certainly came off as a significant leader
of his community.” Silberklang commented on the exceptional nature of Cooper’s protest because his organization “was not exactly the power group in the community, like a church or something.”

William Cooper was in many ways a great hero: he tirelessly campaigned for the rights of oppressed Aborigines until his death in 1941 at the age of 80, while still supporting oppressed peoples throughout the world. Cooper was fearless, diligent, and ambitious in his pursuit for greater equality for minority groups. Coming from a group of people so marginalized by its society, his accomplishments are extraordinary. However, what makes Cooper so inspiring to me is the ordinariness of his background. Cooper was an amazing person, but he was in no way wealthy or politically connected. He was just an outraged citizen who was willing and unafraid to speak out and condemn atrocities. Although he was a strong activist for Aboriginal rights, Cooper was cognizant of world events and still cared about the issues that afflicted other groups. Learning about Kristallnacht in the news inspired Cooper to take a stand. Had more and more people protested and complained to their governments about the terrible actions committed against Jews, perhaps world leaders would have listened and taken action. Perhaps the Holocaust was preventable. In the past year, marked by a wave of worldwide protests and rebellions, it appears that no issue is too small to be overlooked. Cooper’s heroism motivates me to maintain my own awareness of global current events in order to understand the problems afflicting other parts of the world. In my personal life, his actions remind me that I need to stand up and be an advocate for those people being persecuted or mistreated. For example, if I witness somebody being bullied, I will not be a bystander. William Cooper inspires me to protest against things I know are wrong, regardless of how many people are on my side, because if enough people choose to take action, the world can be a much better place.
Works Cited


