Beyond the flagship: politics & transatlantic trade in American department stores, 1900-1945

Lefebvre, Niki C.

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/19748

Boston University
BEYOND THE FLAGSHIP: POLITICS & TRANSATLANTIC TRADE
IN AMERICAN DEPARTMENT STORES, 1900-1945

by

NIKI C. LEFEBVRE
B.A., Mount Holyoke College, 2005
M.A., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2009

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2016
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I reflect on where this project began I cannot but feel astonished by where it has ended up. Several years ago, while doing research in the Louis E. Kirstein Papers at Harvard’s Baker Library, I stumbled across a cache of documents that revealed Kirstein’s efforts to help a handful of his relations escape horrific circumstances—they were Jews living in Nazi Germany. I kept digging and found scores of additional documents connecting Kirstein to high-ranking U.S. diplomats stationed at home and abroad, to offices located in major cities across Europe, and to many more relations, friends, and colleagues suffering under Nazi terror. More than once I found myself moved to tears as I combed through the letters that Kirstein received from people desperate to leave Berlin and Vienna. And more than once I felt palpable relief when I came across proof that Kirstein had helped bring one more person to safety, beyond the borders of the Third Reich. Needless to say, these documents changed the course of my dissertation. I had to know how an executive at Filene’s department store in Boston accomplished such extraordinary feats of rescue. I had to know how Kirstein had such close access to offices in Berlin and Vienna, why he was friendly with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and whether any of it had anything to do with Filene’s department store.

It turns out all of these things had a lot to do with Filene’s, and I am indebted to my indefatigable advisor, Brooke Blower, for helping me figure that out. Brooke believed in this project long before either of us understood what it was all about and for that I will
be forever grateful. At every stage in this process I have turned to Brooke for her invaluable guidance in developing even the most inchoate thoughts; no question has ever been too small, nor any idea ever too inane. To say that Brooke’s passion for history, inspiring intellect, and excitement for this project fueled its completion may sound trite, but nothing could be more true. As both a scholar and a mentor, Brooke has shaped my own work and life in profound ways and I could not be more grateful to her. I have been fortunate, too, to work with Bruce Schulman, from whom I learned how history ought to be taught and who has helped me immeasurably as a second reader on this dissertation. I have rarely seen students so rapt during a lecture as when Bruce has been at the podium. Both in teaching and in scholarship, Bruce sets a high bar and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from him. I regret that I have not had more chances to work with Chris Capozzola across the river at M.I.T., but consider myself incredibly lucky to have him on my dissertation committee. His work has shaped the first two chapters of this dissertation, and every time our paths have crossed I have benefited from his sharp insights, thoughtful questions, and quick sense of humor. I am also grateful to Andrew Robichaud who graciously joined the committee at precisely the right moment. Finally, I thank Jonathan Zatlin, chair of the committee, whose encouragement since we first met through the John E. Sawyer Seminars has likely meant more to me than he knows.

Along this journey I have received generous material support from many sources, including, first and foremost, from the American & New England Studies program, which has awarded me several teaching fellowships, graduate assistantships, and travel grants. A Graduate Writing Fellowship from the Boston University Writing Program
provided me with unparalleled instruction in the basics of teaching writing, as well as
generous support for my research in its earliest stages. A yearlong John E. Sawyer
Seminar Pre-Doctoral Fellowship from the Mellon Foundation provided vital assistance
during my first intensive period of research and writing, as well as an incredible
opportunity to take part in a series of intensive seminars with a number of highly
distinguished scholars of twentieth century history. In particular, I thank Brooke Blower,
Bruce Schulman, Jonathan Zatlin, and Andrew J. Bacevich for the opportunity to take
part in those seminars, and Gene Tempest and Zach Fredman for their camaraderie and
good conversation. Finally, the Boston University Center for the Humanities has
supported my work with several generous awards, including a Graduate Dissertation
Fellowship that has propelled me through this final year of writing. I especially thank
James Winn, Ana Maria Reyes, Minou Arjomand, Yuri Corrigan, Jonathan Foltz,
Michael Prince, Jon Roberts, Devin Byker, Sophia Mizouni, and Zach Fredman for
reading an especially rough cut of chapter four and helping me see its merits. I learned
much from reading their fascinating work, each one offering another brilliant lens
through which to view the past. I also thank Christine Loken-Kim for her expert
management, constant encouragement, and excellent menu planning.

Countless people have shaped who I have become as a scholar, but I will begin by
thanking some of the professors who made history most exciting during my years at
Mount Holyoke College. To Mary Renda, Daniel Czitrom, Holly Hanson, and Joseph J.
Ellis, I thank you for delivering lectures and organizing seminars that always left me
wanting to learn more. I thank Harold Garrett-Goodyear for recognizing in me something
of a writer and a teacher early on. Working with Harold always inspired me to do better. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I had the great pleasure of working closely with Marla Miller, whose genuine goodness, beautiful writing, and deep love of the past is unparalleled. Despite the fact that my scholarship has landed in the twentieth century, I will always cherish the eighteenth century, and I have Marla to thank for that. I also thank Alice Nash and David Glassberg, whose work and insights forever changed how I view the people and landscapes around me. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to spend several summers at Historic Deerfield under the direction of Josh Lane, whose friendship and mentorship I have treasured. In the course of my research I have come across many helpful archivists, but Tim Mahoney, Ben Johnson, Abby Thompson, Catherine Fox, and Melissa Murphy in the historical collections at Harvard’s Baker Library have been an invaluable resource to me throughout. And I especially thank Joan Adler and Catherine McIlvaine Smith at the Straus Historical Society, who helped make my first research trip as a new mother easy and who shared their wealth of knowledge about the Straus family with me. I especially thank Joan for welcoming me into her home and supporting this project ever since. To all the wonderful staff in the Clapp Library at Wellesley College, where I have written most of this dissertation, I thank you for your warmth and for fostering a space in which ideas abound and hard work thrives.

I have been fortunate to work alongside so many remarkable students, faculty, and staff in the American & New England Studies program. I thank Kim Sichel for her leadership in the program and encouragement during my first years in coursework, and I will never forget how Nina Silber and Marilyn Halter went to bat for me when I was
thrown a curveball. I especially thank Marilyn for introducing me to the history of department stores, and more importantly, for the invaluable role she has played as a mentor through some of the most difficult aspects of this journey. I also thank Keith Morgan whose exceptional teaching and love of Boston’s history prompted me to look at the Louis Kirstein papers in the first place. Ben Tocchi and Julia Gawle have also eased the way in every sense and always kept the program running smoothly. I am especially grateful to my cohort and the larger student community whose passions and insights have inspired me over the years. In particular, I thank Mary Kuhn and Casey Riley who managed to see the promise in some of the earliest and messiest drafts of this project. Casey and I began this journey separately, but we approach the finish as the closest of friends. I could not be more thankful for her brilliant insights as a scholar, or for her compassion as a friend.

I could not have completed this project without the endless love and support of my dearest friends and family. I thank Elana Kimbrell, Leah Serinsky, Lauren Blair, and Quiana Salazar-King for always, always believing in me—and for always, always making me laugh. I can never be grateful enough for my friendship with Sarah Murray, whose encouragement, resilience, and empathy has made every problem seem surmountable and every day that much better. I thank Breton, Julia, and Sienna, for their love. I thank Nancy and Mike, whose presence in our lives has brought us so much, and without whose support we would not have made it through—I am forever grateful to both of you. I thank my Grandmother McDonald who lined her living room with history books and was always quick to share an anecdote about one founding father or another. This
would mean so much to her and she meant so much to me. I also thank my Mémère Lefebvre, who has always loved to talk about what it was like to shop at the good old department stores. I will forever cherish her stories. Words seem insufficient to express how grateful I am for the love and support of my parents. To my father, I thank you for showing me what it means to work hard. And to my mother, I thank you for showing me what it means to persevere—no matter what. I could not have done any of this without you. Finally, to my husband and daughter: I love you. I began this journey on my own, but I complete it as a wife and a mother—I could not imagine it otherwise. At every turn you have made the process richer and more meaningful. To Joseph, I can never thank you enough for doing it all so that I could see this through. And to Anna Claire, I thank you for making every day immeasurably brighter. May you always have the courage to finish what you start.
ABSTRACT

Historians have long viewed American department stores as barometers of social change, anchors of modern urban life, and purveyors of a new kind of consumer capitalist culture. In its heyday, from the late nineteenth century to the middle twentieth century, the department store was all of these things, but it was also much more. This dissertation draws on business, government, and family papers to reveal how a new kind of businessman, the department store retailer, pioneered powerful political and trade networks that were deeply embedded in Washington and stretched across the Atlantic into the increasingly volatile capitals of Europe. As campaign contributors, trade policy advisors, and political appointees, retailers like John Wanamaker, Isidor Straus, Louis Kirstein, and Ira Hirschmann regularly moved through the inner circles of the national government. They could just as easily be found on Capitol Hill, or at trade offices located in London or Paris, as behind their own desks in the upper floors of Wanamaker’s or Filene’s. Retailers’ command of vast transatlantic trade networks, now largely forgotten, made them key participants in pressing debates about everything from tariff reform and economic recovery to wartime mobilization and the plight of refugees. Yet retailers
approached politics and commerce with profoundly different sensibilities than executives at other major American corporations, such as Ford, United Fruit, or Coca Cola. In the retail industry, commercial expansion depended not on the domination of foreign markets and foreign workers, but rather on transnational cooperation and the development of policies and business methods that upheld both the sovereignty and distinctiveness of other nations—and their goods. In this complex era, as the imperatives of trade routinely collided with politics and other large forces, from devastating world wars and widespread depression to the rise of new radical ideologies, retailers did much more than market desire. They brokered vital connections between Americans, Washington, and the world.
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INTRODUCTION

American Retailers in Washington and the World:

A New Vision for American Department Stores

Historians have long viewed American department stores as barometers of social change, anchors of modern urban life, and purveyors of a new kind of consumer capitalist culture. In its heyday, from the late nineteenth century to the middle twentieth century, the department store was all of these things, but it was also much more. This dissertation reveals how department store retailers pioneered powerful political and trade networks that were grounded in Washington and stretched across the Atlantic into the increasingly volatile capitals of Europe. As campaign contributors, trade policy advisors, and political appointees, retailers moved through the inner circles of the national government. Their command of vast transatlantic trade networks made them key participants in pressing debates about everything from tariff reform and economic recovery to wartime mobilization and the plight of refugees. Yet retailers approached politics and commerce with profoundly different sensibilities than executives at other major American corporations, such as Ford, United Fruit, or Coca Cola. In the retail industry, commercial expansion depended not on the domination of foreign markets and foreign workers, but rather on transnational cooperation and the development of policies and business methods that upheld both the sovereignty and distinctiveness of other nations—and their goods. In this complex era, as the imperatives of trade routinely collided with politics and other large forces, from devastating world wars and widespread depression to the rise of new
radical ideologies, retailers did much more than market desire. They brokered vital connections between Americans, Washington, and the world.¹

To unveil a new kind of department store history, this dissertation puts forward five key arguments. The first is that retailers at these establishments were deeply embedded in Washington politics. This now forgotten connection was forged early in the history of the business. On the eve of the American Civil War Alexander T. Stewart, who has often been labeled the “father” of American department stores, lent his money and influence to a secretive “Committee of Fifteen” that worked to oppose sectionalism in congress and to keep trade open between northern and southern states. After the war Stewart led a fundraising campaign for Republican presidential candidate Ulysses S. Grant and received an appointment to serve as Secretary of the Treasury. When congress blocked the appointment, citing the 1789 Establishment Act, which prohibited persons involved in the “business of trade and commerce” from holding such a position, the aging Stewart settled for chairing the U.S. Government Commission to the 1867 Paris

Exposition. In 1884, Oscar Straus of Macy’s department store similarly served as secretary for a national committee of businessmen devoted to raising funds for Democratic presidential candidate Grover Cleveland. Once Cleveland was in the White House he appointed Straus U.S. Minister to the Ottoman Empire. Oscar’s brother Isidor, who remained at the helm of Macy’s, also had Cleveland’s ear and traveled back and forth between Washington and New York to advise the president on the hottest political issue of the decade: tariff reform. At the height of his political influence during Cleveland’s second administration, New York Democrats all but begged Isidor to run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. He agreed, and he won. John Wanamaker, too, raised campaign funds to find a path into politics. In 1888 he chaired the finance committee for the National Republican Party and raised substantial sums on behalf of Benjamin Harrison’s presidential bid. In turn, Harrison appointed Wanamaker Postmaster General, which gave him a place in the president’s cabinet. As Wanamaker grew to become the most influential retailer in the country by the turn of the century, he retained his connections to the Republican Party and continued to influence national elections and trade policies.²

When the United States entered the First World War in 1917, the state’s inability to meet the needs of wartime mobilization on its own opened up new opportunities for retailers to win government appointments and gain political influence. None took better advantage of that fact, or contributed more in terms of national service, than Louis Kirstein of Filene’s department store in Boston. Kirstein was appointed Chairman of the Board of Control for Labor Standards, which oversaw major supply contracts for the U.S. Army. While in Washington, he worked under the supervision of Brigadier General Robert E. Wood, who would go on to become perhaps the most influential executive in the history of Sears Roebuck Co. Kirstein remained closely tied to the Democratic Party and backed Franklin D. Roosevelt for president in 1933. Just months after entering the oval office, Roosevelt appointed Kirstein to the Industrial Advisory Board, created under the auspices of the National Recovery Act, and the Boston retailer spent many months in Washington developing national codes to control prices and wages in the retail industry. Jesse Isidor Straus, son of Isidor Straus and his successor as President of Macy’s, was also an enthusiastic and wealthy backer of Roosevelt and (like his Uncle Oscar before him) he accepted the president’s appointment to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to France in 1933. National mobilization for the Second World War once again opened doors for a new generation of retailers, including Kirstein’s son George, a vice president at Bloomingdale’s who served as the Executive Secretary of the National War Labor Board before shipping off to the South Pacific. Another Bloomingdale’s executive, Ira Hirschmann, who helped run Fiorello La Guardia’s several successful mayoral campaigns in New York City, also leveraged his connections in Washington to land a
position on Roosevelt’s War Refugee Board in 1944. From that position, he helped tens of thousands of Jewish refugees escape near certain death in Nazi concentration camps located throughout the Balkans.³

Scholars have tended to refer to businessmen like Wanamaker, Kirstein, Straus, and Hirschmann, as merchants. But these men actually pioneered a new kind of businessman: the retailer. Merchants, as Americans had long understood the label, had been a person who engaged in trade; they traveled extensively, often across oceans, to buy and sell goods for some company or other wealthy entity. A merchant’s life was exciting, filled with adventure and intrigue, and proximity to wealth and power. Over time, however, English speakers began to use the term interchangeably with “peddler,” to indicate a person who traveled door-to-door selling goods—a much more local and humbler kind of merchant. In 1871, for example, the title of Horatio Alger’s dime novel *Paul the Peddler; Or, The Adventures of a Young Street Merchant* employs both terms to frame the trials of fourteen year-old Paul who hawked candy on the streets of New York to support his widowed mother. Then, as large-scale commerce changed the appearance of city streets in the late nineteenth century, many began to differentiate between peddlers who moved through neighborhoods and merchants who owned fixed places of business.

³ There are no published biographies of Louis Kirstein. On Kirstein and WWI, see correspondence in multiple folders (especially “Overseas Correspondence” and “Personal”) in Box 37, Louis E. Kirstein Papers, Harvard’s Baker Library [hereafter LEK HBL]. Kirstein’s political work in the 1930s is more extensively covered in chapters four and five; James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution: Robert E. Wood and Sears, Roebuck* (New York: New American Library, 1986); on Jesse Isidor Straus, see Jesse Isidor Straus Papers, Straus Historical Society; also see “R.H. Macy, Box 86, LEK HBL; On George Kirstein, see: “I.A. Hirschmann, ”Box 84, LEK HBL; on Hirschmann, see Ira Hirschmann, *Caution to the Winds* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1962); also see: Ira Hirschmann Papers & War Refugee Board Records, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library.
Paul the Peddler went to print at the start of this sweeping transition. By the end of the novel young Paul finds success by landing a position at a “fixed” street stand selling neckties. “He was not a merchant prince, to be sure,” Alger wrote in the conclusion, “but he had a fixed place of business.” Alger titled the second installment in Paul’s story, Slow and Sure; Or, From the Sidewalk to the Shop (1872). By the turn of the twentieth century, many believed that commercial success could be tracked in a progression from outside to inside, or from movement to fixity. The greatest of the so-called “merchant princes,” owners of America’s iconic “palaces of consumption,” wholeheartedly endorsed this narrative. When Wanamaker opened his signature flagship store in the center of Philadelphia in 1911, he celebrated its sheer scale—forty-five acres of floor space for shoppers to roam—as the most tangible symbol of his commercial success. Little more than fifty years later, amid the decline of modern department stores across the country, one of the earliest histories of American retailing cemented the same narrative in its title, From Peddlers to Merchant Princes: A History of Selling in America (1967). This theme has been so pervasive in department store histories that most scholars have written about Wanamaker and his peers as though their work only rarely took them beyond their flagship stores; as if the buying and selling of goods took place within the limits of a single city block.4

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To call the executives who populate these pages merchants is to fundamentally misrepresent their work as fixed or contained by the flagship stores they built, when, in fact, it was far more dynamic and expansive. Industry leaders increasingly styled themselves as retailers during the second decade of the twentieth century to capture the modern, changing nature of their work and their multifaceted roles as businessmen. When President William Howard Taft gave a keynote address from the Grand Court inside Wanamaker’s new flagship building in 1911, he called Wanamaker the “greatest merchant in America.” But during the very same year, industry leaders agreed to call their first nationwide trade organization the National Retail Dry Goods Association (now the National Retail Federation). “Retail” appeared with increasing frequency in the titles of popular trade journals, books, and manuals, from the monthly organ, *The Modern Retailer* (est. 1915) to the widely read study by Dr. Paul H. Nystrom, *The Economics of Retailing* (1917), and the Butler Brothers’ handbook, *Success in Retailing: The Variety Business* (1920). By the 1930s, references to “dry goods” and “merchants” began to fall away from industry labels altogether. When President Roosevelt ordered the development of new codes to regulate department stores, he called them “retail codes,” and when Kirstein spearheaded the organization of a powerful lobbying group that attracted over one million members nationwide in 1935, he called it the American Retail Federation. When Kirstein died at age seventy-five in 1942, tributes more often described him as “one of the nation’s leading department store executives,” a “chief executive,” or a “Vice President,” than as a merchant. By then, common associations with “merchants” bore little resemblance to the kind of work undertaken by leading retailers like Kirstein, who
could just as easily be found at trade offices located in London or Paris or even on Capitol Hill, as behind their own desks in the upper floors of their flagship stores.\(^5\) Department store executives did not just nurture connections to Washington politics. The second key argument of this dissertation is that they also built extensive and consequential overseas networks that have never been thoroughly studied. Now largely forgotten, these international dimensions to the department store business appeared obvious to Americans at the time. Establishments like Marshall Field’s, one writer argued in 1893, were “mechanism[s] that worked from day to day and from year to year, in all parts of the earth.”\(^6\) Again these connections began early. Already in the middle of the nineteenth century, A. T. Stewart managed small import offices attached to manufacturers based in Paris, Lyons, Manchester, Nottingham, Belfast, Glasgow, and Berlin.\(^7\) By the 1890s the nation’s leading department stores, including Wanamaker’s and Macy’s, maintained large trade offices in Paris and regularly sent buyers to manufacturing centers throughout Britain and into Central Europe, especially to Germany. Department stores that could not afford to keep proprietary trade offices abroad contracted with foreign commissionaire firms to represent their interests in Europe’s markets and regularly sent visiting American buyers across the Atlantic to work directly with commissionaires. In the years following the First World War, every major American department store owned at least a share in cooperative trade offices scattered


\(^{7}\) Letter from unknown author, July 23, 1869, “Additions 130-D,” Box 1, Alexander Turney Stewart Papers, New York Public Library. Also see Elias, *The Forgotten Merchant Prince*. 
across Europe. Filene’s, for example, entered into cooperative trade offices located in Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, Zurich, Brussels, Belfast, Chenmitz, Gablonz, and Florence. “The world is our hunting ground!” a Filene’s advertisement boasted in 1929. Of course, in their references to “all parts of the earth” and “the world,” what Americans really meant during this period was Europe. For better and for worse, Europe marked the center of the American retail trade during the first half of the twentieth century. Although many retailers established trade offices in other parts of the world, principally in Yokohama, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Beijing, none of the offices in these cities rivaled those in Paris, London, and Berlin. In nearly every measure, from staff size to operating and buying budgets, trade offices in Europe towered over their counterparts in Asia. As Director of the Foreign Office Committee of the AMC Kirstein kept in regular touch with trade managers in Europe, sometimes on a daily basis, by mail, telegraph, and occasionally by telephone. By contrast, only one very slight folder of correspondence documents his relationship with the trade manager of the offices in Yokohama and Tokyo. Europe was much closer to Boston and New York both in physical terms—retailers thought nothing of spending one week on board a steamship to visit Paris—but also in cultural terms. Americans adored the fanciful eastern flares of styles said to originate in China and Japan, but most of these fashions came from the ateliers of Paris designers and were inspired by their ideas about far-off lands they had likely never visited. Moreover, as this dissertation shows, the extensive involvement of

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the American retail trade in the capitals of Europe in an age when warfare twice
devastated the continent would implicate department stores in a wide array of
international currents from transatlantic relief efforts to anti-Nazi boycotts. ⁹

As transatlantic retail trade brought retailers into close touch with the capitals of
Europe, this in turn reinforced their connections to Washington. Retailers had a stake in
shaping foreign policy debates because matters such as tariff rates greatly affected their
business. Both Isidor Straus and Wanamaker spent considerable time advising their
party’s leaders on foreign trade policies, stumping for candidates whom they believed
would most benefit the American retail business, and pouring contributions into their
campaign coffers. Like the majority of industry leaders who followed him, Straus was a
resolute Democrat and proponent of free trade. Wanamaker, too, despite his almost pious
devotion to the Republican Party, favored progressive tariff reforms—just not quite to the
lower levels that Democrats preferred.

Regular access to foreign trade offices also kept retailers in close touch with
diplomats and consular officials stationed in Europe, some of whom later became
important figures in Washington. In 1933, for example, the manager of Filene’s
cooperative trade office in Germany, developed a relationship with then Consul General
at Berlin, George S. Messersmith. When Messersmith became Assistant Secretary of
State under Roosevelt in 1937 he proved to be one of Kirstein’s most valuable allies in
helping individual refugees escape Nazi Germany. Finally, as major importers of foreign

⁹ Kristin Hoganson, Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920
goods, retailers were generally supportive of reciprocity agreements and other measures designed to stabilize American foreign relations and maintain peace in Europe. No American retailer more vigorously embraced those principles than Kirstein’s oft-studied colleague, the irascible visionary, Edward Filene. An avid supporter of Woodrow Wilson, Filene was regarded in Europe as a kind of plenipotentiary, though he never held an official diplomatic post. Filene ardently backed the formation of the International Chamber of Commerce in 1919, established a widely publicized European Peace Prize in 1924 (he received 15,000 entries), and helped to found the International Management Institute for the promotion of modern business techniques globally. In more subtle ways, too, retailers welcomed the improvement of foreign relations through trade. In 1934, when Austrian trade officials visited the United States calling for more balance in Austro-American trade relations, they argued that it was “the key” to peace in Europe. In New York City, retailers honored the legation with a luncheon at the Waldorf-Astoria; two years later, Americans were awash in Austrian fashions.

The third claim of this dissertation is that the nature of retailers’ business abroad allowed them to move through the world with a different set of sensibilities than executives at other major corporations. American retailers did not seek to export or sell products, ideas, or even business models to Europeans. Nor, did they aim to exploit foreign workers in order to make, process, or sell products under brand-names now

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synonymous with the history of American commercial hegemony in the twentieth century, such as Ford Motor Co., United Fruit, Coca Cola, or even Hollywood. Recent studies of major American corporations have revealed the destructive and violent sides of commercial expansion in the twentieth century. When Henry Ford attempted to export an entire Midwestern town, tennis courts included, to the Amazon River basin in the name of vertical integration, he instead brought a blight upon the rubber trees, the region, and his own workers. Similarly, when United Fruit exported and enforced a Jim Crow labor system in Latin America, the company was thrust to the forefront of virulent labor conflicts and undermined stability in the region. The histories of these corporations have folded neatly into a narrative that casts American commercial expansion as imperial, a force that, as Victoria de Grazia has persuasively argued, undermined the sovereignty of other nations and shaped a “market empire” that displaced older methods of foreign conquest. The “outward thrust” model of American history, or “Americanization of the world” paradigm, has been central to studies that have situated Americans abroad, whether they were doing business, philanthropy, diplomacy, conducting military operations, or even just traveling. However, the American retail trade established a fundamentally different pattern. To cast foreign trade offices as imperial outposts would be to miss the unique role they played as cultural and commercial contact zones.11

Retailers viewed alliances with their foreign counterparts as vital to the success of their trade and, equally important, their business depended on upholding the unique qualities, customs, and characteristics particular to the nations and regions of Europe. As Kristin Hoganson has shown, Americans in this era wanted identifiably foreign imports to adorn their homes and wardrobes. Such objects said important things about Americans’ connections to other people and places, and so it was in retailers’ interest not to dominate foreign markets or impose their own visions on foreign buyers. Only for two brief periods in 1911-12 and in 1932 did “buy national” movements stimulate widespread interest in the purchase of goods because they were in some way distinctively American; otherwise, New Yorkers and San Franciscans alike craved imports, or at least the appearance of authentic foreign influence on their merchandise, from dresses inspired by the designs of Poiret and Callot to sweaters that reflected the folk traditions of the Austrian Alps. In order to bring the most authentic foreign goods at the best prices into their stores, retailers worked to establish partnerships in the capitals of Europe and staffed their trade offices with local managers and buyers. When Kirstein or a buyer from Filene’s spent time at their foreign offices the permanent local staff regarded them as visitors; and they were, in every sense of the term. Local resident buyers knew the language, customs, and expectations of the designers and manufacturers in their region. They helped visiting American buyers to negotiate headline-making merchandise deals and they had the power to withhold or obstruct those opportunities. At Filene’s

*Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982);
Reinhold Wagnleitner,*Coca Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
cooperative trade office in Paris, which the firm shared with nearly two dozen other department stores that joined together under the auspices of the Associated Merchandising Corporation (AMC), local French buyers facilitated a major deal for a large order of French frocks at unprecedented low prices in 1923. Not one of the visiting American buyers involved in the deal spoke French and Parisian manufacturers did not conduct business in English—local French buyers played a pivotal role in the deal from beginning to end. Although cooperation at foreign trade offices was not always the rule of the day, for American retailers, it was always the goal.

The fourth key finding of this dissertation is that while Wanamaker was the undisputed leader of the national retail industry before the First World War, a new class of predominantly Jewish retailers moved to center stage in its aftermath. Without a doubt, Wanamaker ran one of the largest retail businesses in the country, but there were others that competed on the same scale, such as Marshall Field’s, Macy’s, and Gimbels. To a greater extent than sales volumes or the grandeur of flagship buildings, however, political influence and transatlantic trade determined industry leadership. Having served as Postmaster General from 1888-1892, the “Honorable” (his official title) John Wanamaker amassed more national political influence than any other retailer, and he hobnobbed with presidents and congressmen in Washington all his life. In addition, Wanamaker’s ran one of the first and most impressive trade offices in Paris, beginning in 1888. The firm always carried the latest in haute couture, regularly secured deals for exclusive Paris styles, and even remade entire sales floors in stores back in the United States to look like the fashionable rue de la Paix. Scholars have often attributed Wanamaker’s tremendous
influence to his innovations in advertising and his ability to generate headline-making
spectacles, but these alone were not what made Wanamaker the center of attention.
Plenty of retailers developed great advertising and drew crowds to their stores through
one demonstration or another, but no one could compete with Wanamaker in Washington
or in Paris; his unparalleled success in both capitals commanded attention from his peers.

When Wanamaker died at the age of 84 in 1922, the American retail trade abroad
was in the midst of sweeping changes. Prior to the First World War, only a few large
firms could compete with Wanamaker’s in Paris, but with the establishment of the AMC,
dozens of stores across the country gained access to the best imported fashions at even
lower prices. Through the rise of group buying and cooperative trade offices in Europe,
smaller stores across the country from Filene’s of Boston and Bloomingdale’s of New
York to J. L. Hudson Co. of Detroit and the Emporium of San Francisco could under-buy
retail giants like Wanamaker’s, even in the highly competitive markets in Paris. In the
twenties and thirties, AMC member executives such as Kirstein, Filene, and Hirschmann
moved to the center of the industry. Their stores set the model for others to follow and,
with a few exceptions, they were almost all Jewish.

In part, but not just because so many of the industry’s most influential executives
were Jewish, no field of American commerce was as deeply shaken by the rise of Adolf
Hitler and the spread of Nazism across Europe as that of department stores. Extensive
trade networks in Berlin in Vienna made American retailers important targets for anti-
Nazi boycotters, even as those same connections granted executives like Kirstein and
Hirschmann privileged access to the capital cities in which Europe’s Jews were most
devastated by Nazi terrorism. In the thirties, Kirstein approached the level of political influence and trade dominance that Wanamaker wielded around the turn of the century. Not only had Kirstein accepted political appointments in both the Wilson and Roosevelt administrations, he had also served many terms on the executive board of the country’s most influential Jewish organization, the American Jewish Committee (AJCOMM). As Hitler tightened his grip on Europe, American department stores emerged as profoundly important crossroads in which the imperatives of trade and politics were routinely pitted against each other. As the influence of Nazism spread and as debates over how Americans ought to respond to crisis facing Europe’s Jews, many American retailers, with Kirstein in the lead, prioritized the free trade policies of the Democratic Party over the principles of the anti-Nazi boycott movement, and many continued to purchase goods in or send them through Berlin. Even for retailers who complied with the boycott, however, shutting down an office in Germany only meant shifting the center of vibrant regional trade networks to Austria, where a quasi-fascist government was heavily invested in exporting a vision of their country that was wholly consistent with Nazi attitudes. By the middle thirties the American retail trade was so entrenched in Central Europe that retailers and buyers could not escape Nazism even when they tried to get beyond its reach.

Yet at the same time, a handful of retailers, especially those connected with the AMC, used their access to trade offices and longstanding connections to U.S. consular officials stationed throughout the Third Reich to intervene in the refugee crisis. In the case of both Kirstein and Hirschmann, their interventions carried enough political clout to
save lives. That Kirstein could call on Messersmith to expedite visas for select refugees, and that Hirschmann could successfully convince State Department officials to place him on the nascent War Refugee Board, had everything to do with their leadership in the retail industry and importance in Jewish and Democratic circles. The demographic shift in the industry after the First World War brought with it important implications for retailers’ trade within the increasingly violent and volatile transatlantic networks in the thirties; there is perhaps no more fertile field for study of Nazism and American business.

The final argument of this dissertation is that retailers played a pivotal role in creating what scholars have variously called American “consumer society,” the “consumer sphere,” or the “consumers’ republic.” There is little question that sometime between 1880 and the end of the Second World War the act of consuming goods became a central, if not defining feature of what it meant to be an American citizen. During this period a great many Americans traded their small town farms for city life and increasingly, money, not land or skills, separated the haves from the have-nots. More and more Americans came to think about democracy in terms of their ability to buy things, and, in the words of progressive reformer Herbert Croly, “comfort and prosperity” emerged as more central to the promise of American life than either political or economic freedom. “Consumerism,” some historians have argued, surpassed religion and politics as the dominant form of public life in the early twentieth century, and even religious holidays became extravagant commercial affairs centered on the buying of gifts. Many studies have emphasized the more destructive aspects of consumer society, that is, how consumption diminished the value of work, drove economic inequality, eclipsed
traditions that once fostered social solidarity, and reinforced an array of discriminatory practices that greatly disadvantaged non-whites. At the same time, Americans have often used their buying power as consumers to great advantage. Immigrants wore cheap readymade clothes to appear more American, women shopped to establish a public presence, and Americans across the spectrum called for boycotts or demanded bargains to serve a wide range of political and economic needs. Yet, for all their power and influence, consumers did not shop in a vacuum. They did not create the marketplace, nor did they control what appeared on store shelves or how those items were marketed and priced; retailers did. At every turn, consumers acted within, alongside, or against the retailers who had shipped merchandise into the so-called consumer sphere in the first place.12

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To reimagine flagship buildings as the central hubs of vast transatlantic trade networks deeply entrenched in national debates and international conflicts is to render visible the economic and political conditions that constrained the marketplace. Consumers browsing the little French Store filled with lingerie at Wanamaker’s, or admiring the Alpine ski fashions displayed alongside an antique coal-burning stove at Bloomingdale’s, shopped at the nexus of trade and politics. It was not just glass, light, and color that dazzled, as William Leach and others have argued, but also the way those flagship institutions brokered Americans’ connections to Washington, war, and the broader transatlantic world. In the zeal to recover the history of consumers and move them to the center of studies in twentieth century American history, scholars have neglected the other people and processes that shaped the marketplace. That is, the retailers and buyers who sourced the goods, brought them across the Atlantic, and marketed them to Americans. With this new vision of retailers as political players in Washington and influential traders abroad, consumption, too, emerges as a decidedly less provincial act, and even more central to American public life.

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This dissertation traces the story of how department stores and their retailers shaped politics and trade in the age of world wars in five roughly chronological chapters. Chapter one uncovers Wanamaker’s close ties to the Republican Party, and to President
William Howard Taft in particular. Taft emerged as a presidential candidate in favor of moderate tariff reform at a moment when foreign trade policies threatened to divide the GOP and when many Americans suffered from what they called the high cost of living. As a fellow proponent of moderate tariff reductions, Wanamaker backed both of Taft’s campaigns and felt the sting of the president’s failure to see his reform agenda through congress in 1909. In the wake of that failure, department stores became central battlegrounds in a larger debate over the high cost of living and cultural nationalism—that is, whether a singular American style or culture might be developed to stand apart from foreign influences. As a leading Republican and a major importer of Paris fashions, Wanamaker was trapped in a vise between bargain hunters and fashion nationalists. Despite widespread pressure on retailers to sell low-cost and uniquely American goods, Wanamaker held steadfast to his longstanding connections in the high-end Paris trade. Even as he developed new low-priced initiatives and reframed his stores as allies to consumers in the battle against the high cost of living, Wanamaker never capitulated to the anti-Paris rhetoric of fashion nationalists. Although many American retailers eventually began to promote American-made goods alongside Paris designs, for Wanamaker these celebrations of American workmanship reflected his fears about Democratic financial reforms rather than any allegiance to fashion nationalism. If there was to be any sense of a national culture in fashion, retailers ensured that it would have more to do with low prices than the national origins of goods. On the eve of the First World War, the Paris trade continued to dominate the American retail industry.
Wanamaker remained devoted to the Republican Party throughout the First World War, but after 1914 developments across the Atlantic provided the dominant frame for his business decisions and reshaped his political priorities. Chapter two reveals how department stores connected Americans to the war as it unfolded abroad. Although the war threatened crucial transatlantic supply lines, retail buyers ensured that Americans continued to receive Paris fashions, which they now cast not as desirable tastes of aristocratic distinction but as tangible symbols of support for a beleaguered sister republic. After the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, however, retailers also invested anew in patriotic fashions, a trend that was led by Wanamaker and wholly wrapped up in a growing conservative, even hawkish movement urging national preparedness. America’s official entry into the war in April 1917 thrust department stores to the center of mobilization programs, especially Liberty Loan drives and fundraising for the American Red Cross. Amid widespread calls for shoppers to curtail spending, retailers proved master manipulators of government demands and language to serve both the nation and their own bottom lines. By the end of the war, retailers had positioned their institutions as widely accepted agents of the state and continued to promote sales in the context of national service and “fair prices.”

In the aftermath of the war a new class of retailers joined together under the auspices of the Associated Merchandising Corporation (AMC) to establish cooperative trade offices across Europe. Chapter three illustrates how the business and culture of AMC retail trade offices in Europe differed from other varieties of commercial expansion abroad. While recent studies have shown the violent, destructive, and imperial sides of
American corporations operating overseas, AMC executives, led by Kirstein, approached Europe with a different set of priorities. They cultivated alliances with retailers in Europe and relied on local buyers to navigate the foreign language and unfamiliar customs of their home countries. American retail trade offices in Europe looked nothing like imperial outposts and instead functioned as spaces in which in Americans and foreigners negotiated both the terms of sale and each other’s differences. In no capital was this truer than in the highly competitive markets in Paris. Tensions ran high at the AMC trade office in the French capital and often broke along national lines, pitting visiting American buyers against local French staff. Despite these tensions, by the middle of the decade the AMC did the largest business of any group of retailers anywhere in the world and maintained offices in ten major European cities. Although the onset of the Great Depression forced the AMC to close down smaller satellite offices in cities like Belfast and Zurich, by the 1930s more American retailers were more deeply embedded in European trade networks than at any previous point in U.S. history.

When Adolf Hitler assumed the Chancellorship of Germany in 1933, the extensive trade networks that retailers maintained in Berlin thrust them to the forefront of tense debates over how Americans ought to respond to the rise of Nazism in Europe. Chapter four exposes influential retailers’ deep roots both in leading circles of the Democratic Party and in major American Jewish organizations, especially the American Jewish Committee. Although anti-Nazi boycotters placed enough pressure on department stores in New York City to force German merchandise off their shelves, most retailers continued to buy and trade through Berlin, a major hub for goods produced in Central
Europe. At the same time, an intensification of Austro-American trade relations prompted many stores that had refused to sell German wares to expand their investments in Vienna. By the mid-thirties Americans who had staunchly resisted Nazi merchandise found themselves surrounded by Alpine folk fashions, from Tyrolean sweaters to the latest skiwear seen at high-end resorts in the Alps. However, as part of a trade initiative fostered by the rightwing Austrian government, Alpine fashions consciously projected an image of Austrian national life that was both anti-Semitic and anti-modern. In the zeal to replace German merchandise, American retailers and consumers alike indulged in a fashion trend that was wholly consistent with Nazi attitudes. Not until Alpine fashions earned the Nazi label following the Anschluss in March 1938 did Americans reject them. By then, however, retailers were so profoundly embedded in trade networks throughout Central Europe that only Germany’s declaration of war on the United States in 1941 could sever the ties that linked the trade capitals of the Third Reich to department stores in New York and Los Angeles.

Although the extensive retail trade networks that crisscrossed Central Europe in the 1930s implicated department stores in charged debates over trade with Germany, they also granted retailers privileged access to U.S. consular officials and other locals living under Nazi rule. The final chapter reveals that retailers leveraged their political influence both at home and abroad on behalf of Jewish refugees suffering under Nazi terrorism. Beginning in 1933 and until his death in 1942, Kirstein leaned on AMC executives and foreign trade managers, U.S. consular officials in Berlin, Vienna, and Paris, and Assistant Secretary of State Messersmith to provide financial support and, in some cases, a
pathway out of Germany for Jewish relations, friends, and colleagues. He also opened
doors for Ira A. Hirschmann, an executive at AMC member store Bloomingdale’s, in
powerful circles within the Democratic Party and throughout the Roosevelt
Administration. Ultimately, Hirschmann forced his way onto Roosevelt’s War Refugee
Board and became its first special attaché in January 1944. From his new post in Ankara,
Turkey, Hirschmann negotiated deals that released tens of thousands of Jews from
concentration camps in the Balkans and secured transportation for many more through
the Black Sea and onto Palestine. Leading American retailers, many of whom were
Jewish, were uniquely positioned to intervene in the refugee crises because of their
extensive networks both in Washington and in Nazi-controlled territories. Few American
executives did more to save the lives of those at risk during the greatest humanitarian
crisis of the twentieth century.
CHAPTER ONE

_Wanamaker’s America: Paris Fashions, Turn-of-the-Century Tariff Reforms, and the Failures of Cultural Nationalism_

_Introduction_

In 1912, the advice columnist Dorothy Dix predicted that “the time will not be far distant when a respectable American woman will no more think of getting her clothes from Paris than she does her morals.” Dix insisted that women ought to disregard the influence of Parisian couturiers and buy fashions designed in America and by Americans. “Too long,” she intoned, “have we been under the thralldom of the fallacious idea that all sartorial glory not only originated in Paris, but stayed there.” Paris had “hypnotized” American women to such a degree that “we have taken whatever Paris handed out and have worn it, no matter what freaks it made us look like.” Dix argued that the “sloppiest” dressmaking establishments in the world could be found on the banks of the Seine and that women’s clubs across the country ought to be “combating the hoary superstition that Paris is capable of clothing American women of refinement and taste.” Millions of American women read Dix’s widely syndicated advice columns and she received an average of two thousand letters each week, some from women who requested they meet to discuss the questions at hand. A good number of letter writers assumed that Dix worked at their own local newspaper office in part because she so closely captured their concerns; she wrote in the voice of the proverbial lady next door. In fact, Dix was born in Tennessee and spent two decades writing in Manhattan for the _New York Journal_ before
settling permanently at the *Picayune* in New Orleans. Although she was not nearly so provincial as most of the women who valued her guidance, Dix had never crossed the Atlantic. For all her criticisms of the dress shops on the banks of the Seine, and for all her attacks on the morals of French women, Dix had never set foot in Paris. But an American woman in New Orleans, New York, or Omaha did not have to travel abroad to be critically engaged in big questions about the nation and its position in the world. In 1912, women inserted their voices into a long running debate about foreign influences on American culture every time they purchased a dress at their local department store. Presumably, the label on the dress, whether it was in French or English, said a lot about a woman’s political opinions and worldviews.  

During the second decade of the twentieth century, department stores became entangled in a tense and highly partisan debate over the role fashion played in establishing a sense of a uniquely American national culture. In one sense, the debate had its origins in a long and gradual transition from a patchwork of rural, local, and geographically disparate economies in the nineteenth century towards a national economy around the start of the twentieth. More and more, Americans found themselves part of a national consumer culture in which they read the same advertisements, heard the same jingles, and purchased the same name-brand products, such as Heinz Ketchup, Coca

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Cola, or Lydia Pinkham’s soap. In the arts, too, many began to call for the development of a singular American cultural style. The Music Teachers National Association sponsored all-American concerts and critics agitated for music that reflected the nation’s spirit and people. Nonetheless, disagreement raged over what kinds of cultural influences ought to be allowed into a singular national culture. Elite, native-born white protestants abhorred the inclusion of African American melodies into a national style even as New York’s Tin Pan Alley, run primarily by immigrant Jews, churned out wildly popular sheet music that drew heavily on these traditions, from ragtime and jazz to the blues. Influences from Europe bothered elite Americans, too. When Theodore Roosevelt made a case for cultural nationalism in literature, he called for an end to regional differences and accused eastern elites of fostering too much deference to European opinion. As the journalist Walter Lippmann wrote of Roosevelt, he was “the first President who knew that the United States had come of age—that America was no longer a colony of Europe, and no longer an immature nation cringing on the outskirts of western civilization.” Roosevelt established a “salon” of writers, artists, musicians, reformers, and intellectuals whom he hoped would reveal to the world something of the greatness and distinctiveness of American culture; he even ordered the Government Printing Office to use three hundred new spellings of words to assert American cultural independence from England. Not long after Roosevelt left the White House in 1908, his brand of cultural nationalism
would ripple through the fashion industries, in which Paris—not London—reigned as the supreme arbiter of taste.  

In a more immediate sense, though, the public debate that consumed retailers was also an acute reaction to the Payne Aldrich tariff bill that Republican President William Howard Taft signed into law in 1909. Although Taft had campaigned on a promise to lower tariff rates, he instead raised them on many important raw materials and manufactured goods less than one year into his presidency. The Payne Aldrich bill made clear that Taft did not control congress, nor could he manage his image in the press, which skewered him as an ineffective leader. As one *New York Times* columnist put it, Payne Aldrich “tells the story of [Taft’s] failure to keep pledges repeatedly given, of the abandonment of a resolve... save for a few petty details he yields everything, most of all principle.”

Taft’s stubborn insistence that the bill was the best one the Republican Party ever passed, a refrain he repeated as he traveled the country on speaking tours, further alienated him from Democrats and more moderate Republicans who championed tariff reforms and once viewed him as their ally. While Payne Aldrich is best known for the part it played in destroying Taft’s chances for reelection, it also sparked widespread resentment across the country and thrust retailers to middle of a politically charged conversation over the role of fashion in American life. Despite the centrality of frocks and silks, and of hobble skirts and corsets, to the dialogue, the debates over fashion were

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15 “Mr. Taft’s Retreat,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1909, 6; hereafter *New York Times* will be referred to as *NYT*. 

embedded in longstanding divides between stalwart protectionist Republicans and free-trade Democrats. On the one hand, cash-strapped wage earners already suffering from what they called the “high cost of living,” criticized the bill for driving up prices on consumer goods and demanded bargains. On the other hand, influential progressive reformers called for an end to Paris fashions and for big investments in the development of a uniquely American fashion industry. They did not blame the tariff for high prices; rather, they saw the bill as an opportunity to wrest American women from the influences of the “immoral” French. Price motivated both bargain hunters and fashion nationalists, but so too, did Paris.

American department stores became a central battleground in the backlash to Payne Aldrich, and none more so than John Wanamaker’s. Founded as a small dry goods shop on the outskirts of Philadelphia at the start of the Civil War, by the turn of the century Wanamaker’s business had grown to include two imposing flagships in both Philadelphia and New York, and a large trade office in Paris. Celebrated for his business acumen, religiosity, and teetotaling—he signed letters to his son, “love your water-drinking father”—Wanamaker was also well known in Washington. He had been intertwined with the leadership of the Republican Party since 1888, when his fundraising and contributions to Benjamin Harrison’s presidential campaign earned him a controversial cabinet appointment; some said he “bought” the post.¹⁶ Though Wanamaker

¹⁶ Many of Wanamaker’s contemporaries, especially Democrats believed Wanamaker “bought” the appointment through cash contributions into Harrison’s campaign coffers. Isidor Straus of R. H. Macy’s publicly defended Wanamaker’s honor with a letter to the editor of Harper’s Weekly. See “Mr. John Wanamaker’, Harper’s Weekly, February 9, 1889, 103.
abhored Roosevelt, whom he regarded as an upstart reformer and would later call a “madman,” he remained a reliable and significant leader in the Republican Party, contributing tens of thousands to each one of William McKinley’s and Taft’s presidential campaigns. Wanamaker’s very public associations with the leadership of the party and, more specifically, his close connection to Taft, aligned him with those responsible for Payne Aldrich. At the same time, Wanamaker’s standing as one of the country’s most celebrated importers of Paris fashions gave him an opportunity to take a public stand for or against Paris; or, as fashion nationalists framed it, for or against America. Amid the show windows and luxe displays at Wanamaker’s department stores, bargain hunters and fashion nationalists clashed over price and Paris, and, in a larger sense, over political party doctrine and whether there was such a thing as an American culture in fashion and retail.  

Although the subjects treated in this chapter, from tariff policies and progressive reforms to John Wanamaker and “pocketbook politics,” have inspired numerous scholarly books and articles, they have never been treated together, as central elements in a conversation that played out in America’s department stores and radiated across the Atlantic. Most studies centered on the “tariff wars” peter out before Payne Aldrich and few studies of the “progressive era” touch on the debate over Paris and American

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fashions.\textsuperscript{18} And while John Wanamaker has played an important role in nearly every study of department stores and America’s burgeoning consumer culture, his far-reaching political influence has never been considered alongside his business decisions.\textsuperscript{19} Many historians have emphasized the ways in which consumers leveraged their buying power to gain political influence, but none has considered the extent to which retailers did the same. Nor has any studied the ways in which retail trade networks that crossed the Atlantic drew retailers into the inner circles of Washington.\textsuperscript{20} In the conclusion to her article advocating for American fashions, Dix implored her readers to “quit Paris” and “show that our patriotism amounts to something more than belonging to Colonial Dames and Daughters of the American Revolution societies.”\textsuperscript{21} By the opening decades of the twentieth century the Paris trade was so central to the business of department stores that “quitting” was not an option, but neither was alienating a growing number of fashion

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\textsuperscript{19} John Wanamaker is the central retailer in William Leach’s \textit{Land of Desire}, but Leach makes little more than passing reference to Wanamaker’s politics apart from a discussion of the connection between rural free delivery, which Wanamaker advocated for as Postmaster General and retail delivery service. See Leach, \textit{Land of Desire}, 184-5. Although biographies of Wanamaker published in the 1920s and 30s covered his political activities extensively, the only recent study to cover Wanamaker’s leadership in the Republican Party comes from Richard White. His study however, only covers the 1890s and does not connect Wanamaker’s politics to his business. See White, “The Bull Moose and the Bear.”


\textsuperscript{21} Dix, “American Fashions for American Women.”
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nationalists and bargain hunters. This chapter uncovers how John Wanamaker’s interventions in the backlash to Payne Aldrich set forth a vision of American culture that celebrated the originality of Paris designers alongside the ingenuity of American workers; in political terms, the vision was unabashedly consistent with Republican economic policies. In Wanamaker’s America, there could be no such thing as a national style without the influence of Paris. At the same time, in a period so deeply marked by high tariffs and the rising cost of living, retailers, bargain hunters, and fashion nationalists found common ground not over the national origins of goods, but rather on the value of low prices.

The American Retail Trade in Paris and the Payne Aldrich Tariff Bill

After the turn of the twentieth century, John Wanamaker and his son Rodman welcomed Paris into every aspect of their stores in New York and Philadelphia. Shoppers strolled through entire sales floors designed to resemble the fashionable streets of Paris, especially the rue de la Paix, which had marked the epicenter of the French fashion industry since Charles Frederick Worth opened his design house there in the 1850s. “Here is Paris literally translated,” boasted a Wanamaker’s advertisement after informing shoppers that they could “walk the broad street of the rue de la Paix by winding around our rotunda.” The sixteen shops that dotted the New York store’s replica of the rue de la Paix were “true in architecture,” and displayed women’s blouses, handbags, and scarves just as they were “shown in the heart of Paris itself.” In Philadelphia, John and Rodman
devoted most of a sales floor to what they called “the little gray salons,” and promoted them as a “counterpart on this side of the Atlantic” to the shops of the French capital. Each of the “charming” salons was “thoroughly French in their tone, being furnished, finished, and mirrored like the best Parisian shops.” At Wanamaker’s cafés, shoppers could eat candies made by a “white capped and aproned French chef according to the most delectable French recipes,” and in any department they could request gift-wrapping in the latest French styles. Wanamaker’s also distributed a popular magazine devoted to keeping Americans in touch with the latest French fashions. Buyers stationed at Wanamaker’s trade office on rue des Petites Écuries imbued these fashion reports with a sense of immediacy through titles like, “Lingerie of the Moment in Paris,” or “How French Women Are Wearing Their Hair.” The magazine itself was titled *La Dernière Heure à Paris* to emphasize the store’s close and up-to-the-hour connection to the Paris trade, and Americans loved it—more than ten thousand subscribed at home in Philadelphia. Just as the firm advertised in *Vogue*, for many Americans Wanamaker’s was the “short route” to Paris.22

To a greater extent than any other American department store, Wanamaker’s built its reputation on the Paris trade. The firm’s buyers and advertisers had been especially adept at capturing American attitudes towards the French in their Paris fashion

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promotions and they managed to attract shoppers at the highest income levels through the sale and exhibition of *haute couture*. As historians have shown, Paris was the undisputed global center of fashion, and the city that Americans looked to in order to imagine themselves as part of an aristocratic world class.\textsuperscript{23} At the same time, the Paris trade implicated retailers in a range of tensely partisan debates over foreign trade policies, and especially tariff policies. Having served under the Harrison administration at the beginning of a decade that witnessed some of the most vicious battles over tariffs in American history, Wanamaker was well versed in the politics of foreign trade. However, by 1909, he was one of a growing number of Republicans who challenged longstanding party doctrine that favored high protective tariffs. He stood behind fellow Republican and old friend William Howard Taft in his 1908 campaign for President, largely because Taft had promised to pursue moderate tariff reforms. When Taft’s promise went unrealized and the 1909 Payne Aldrich tariff bill instead raised rates on French imports as much as sixty percent, Wanamaker faced two camps of angry Americans: one that sought lower prices on consumer goods, and another that called for an end to American dependence on Paris fashions. As Taft’s election and the fallout from the Payne Aldrich bill make clear, Wanamaker’s stores operated in as close proximity to Washington as they did to Paris. Retailers had a stake in shaping national economic policies and the consequences of national financial reforms, successful or not, rippled through the business of American department stores long before they reached consumers.

\textsuperscript{23}Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*, 65 – 78.
In 1907, as the American financial system seemed on the verge of collapse, John Wanamaker’s son Rodman received international acclaim for his success in fostering Franco-American trade relations.\(^{24}\) Although John came from rugged Pennsylvania Dutch stock and had dropped out of school at an early age to begin working, Rodman had grown up as the son of one of the country’s most successful businessmen, a millionaire, and a member of the Republican Party’s Old Guard elite. Rodman spent his childhood traveling back and forth across the Atlantic with his father and in 1886 graduated from Princeton University. Early on in life, one biographer noted, Rodman developed a “zeal for France, for her creative genius in art, fashion, and merchandise.” As an adult, he spent at least half of each year in Paris in a home on the Champs Elysées that served as a laboratory for studying the latest European fashions from gowns and jewels to china and tapestries.\(^{25}\) While John might be credited for having the foresight to send his second eldest son to France, it was Rodman who brought Paris back to the stores in Philadelphia and New York. Between 1888 and 1898 he tripled the size of Wanamaker’s Paris headquarters and oversaw the expansion of many new contracts for exclusive French fashions. When John encountered some of Rodman’s imports, especially lingerie, he worried that his son had “gone out of his head.” But Rodman did much more than import ladies’ underwear. He pioneered a program to bring French contemporary art into the Wanamaker stores for free public display and became an energetic member of the

\(^{24}\) Although Roosevelt absorbed much of the blame for the Panic of 1907, it was caused largely by the same forces that led to the Great Depression: inadequate regulation of banks and rampant speculation in stocks. See Gould, *The William Howard Taft Presidency*, 49-50; Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 330-332.

American Art Association of Paris. When President Armand Fallières of France promoted Rodman from a Chevalier to an Officer in the French Legion of Honor in 1907, he cited “his services in promoting the commercial relations between the United States and France.” The American press noted that Rodman had “set the pace” for American department stores to follow in their foreign purchasing, and he was praised for fostering “practical commercial reciprocity” by directing French artisans towards deficiencies in the American markets. That French imports accounted for less than ten percent of Wanamaker’s total inventory mattered little. Under Rodman’s direction, Paris fashions and promotions of French art, history, and culture so dominated the Wanamaker business that many viewed the firm as a direct link to the world capital of fashion.

Wanamaker’s Paris trade made such an impression on Americans largely because Rodman and his buyers were especially adept at capitalizing on American ideas about Paris. In the 1890s Paris represented the uncontested center of an international (albeit overwhelmingly European) fashion system shaped by and preoccupied with aristocrats. Wealthy American women shopped in Paris and purchased French imports because they believed it made them “world class” and associated them with titled and privileged Europeans. At the same time, popular magazines, newspapers, and novels perpetuated

27 “Rodman Wanamaker Made Officer of Legion of Honor,” Washington Bee, September 7, 1907, 3; Wanamaker’s Son Highly Honored by France’s President,” San Francisco Call, August 16, 1907, 5; Appel, Business Biography, 403, 407, 446.
an older idea that France was a land of loose sexual morals. Fin-de-siècle Americans so yearned for stories of a sexualized Paris that even the characters of Yellow Kid, the nation’s most popular comic strip, embarked on a tour of nude art at the Louvre and ventured into the seedy side of the Latin Quarter.29 Wanamaker’s delivered to its patrons both visions of the city. American socialites craving aristocratic fashions attended the firm’s seasonal exhibitions featuring exclusive haute couture from the most celebrated couturiers in Paris. Others indulged in what Scribner’s Magazine called one of Wanamaker’s most popular sights: the “little French store.” According to Scribner’s shoppers were encouraged to browse the little shop’s “most entertaining” and authentic displays of the finest women’s lingerie from Paris.30 The magazine even poked fun at “innocent old ladies” who were said to be caught by surprise when they interpreted the sign for lingerie as a place to “linger.” That Wanamaker’s “little French store” sold only women’s underwear was no oversight; the merchandise was carefully selected to “entertain,” even titillate, and capitalize on Americans’ assumptions about Paris.31

29 Levenstein, Seductive Journeys, 197-203. Lewis Erenberg offers a good discussion of why, at a time of great social unrest, democratic Americans sought comfort in the aristocratic imagery that dominated the exclusive restaurants and hotels on Broadway and Fifth Avenue in New York City. See Erenberg, Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 33-59.

30 Advertisements also repeatedly argued that the little French store was an authentic representation of a Paris shop: “It looks for all the world as if we had picked up one of the dainty shops on the Rue de la Paix and brought it over so that the Paris garments could feel perfectly at home after their journey across the ocean.” See: “A Story of a Store,” Scribner’s Magazine 23 (1898): ii-vii; “Active January Retailing,” advertisement, New York Times, January 16, 1899, 4; “The Lingerie from Paris,” advertisement, New York Daily Tribune, April 27, 1900, 4; “Lingerie in the Little French Store,” advertisement, The Sun, April 24, 1899; “The French Store,” advertisement, New York Times, December 13, 1900, 4.

31 Readers familiar with John Wanamaker’s strict Protestantism may find this point surprising. In 1888, John wrote approvingly to Rodman: “Your underwear is booming and booming with its new fixtures!” John Wanamaker to Rodman Wanamaker, letter, January 1888, WC HSP; also see: Appel, 402.
Following the Paris Exposition of 1900, Wanamaker’s stores began to promote a less sexualized and more historical-cultural vision of Paris. More than sixty-five hundred Americans attended the Paris exposition and they comprised the largest presence of any single nation other than France. Many imagined that the large American contingent, and all those displays of American manufactures, would stimulate French demand for U.S. exports. Horace Porter, the U.S. Ambassador to France spoke as much about profits to be made at the exposition as he did about peace. Indeed, in the years following the exposition, French officials began to recognize their junior sister republic as an “ascending star” in world politics, and they undertook new initiatives to promote French language and culture in the United States. By 1910 France had achieved prominence in the American theater of ideas and the arts, French language programs proliferated at universities across the country, and transatlantic intellectual exchange blossomed.32 Perhaps not surprisingly, these changes in Franco-American cultural relations stimulated as much if not more demand among Americans for French exports, especially at stores like Wanamaker’s. Alongside seasonal exhibitions of exclusive Parisian haute couture, Wanamaker’s organized free public displays celebrating French history and art, such as the 1905 commemoration of Napoleon’s famous victory in the Battle of Austerlitz or the 1906 celebration of the French Revolution. Local teachers and students received special invitations to visit these educational displays, which featured large-scale narrative tableaux, lectures, paintings, documents, flags, weapons, and other artifacts dating to or

copied from the period. Wanamaker’s flagships also showcased, free-of-charge, over six hundred works of contemporary French art imported from the Paris salons, and began celebrating an annual Franco-American Day. At times, even the firm’s advertising emphasized French history over fashion with sketches of the Arc de Triomphe or the Marquis de Lafayette. In 1907 Wanamaker’s boasted that “Paris and all France is best represented in America at Wanamaker’s,” and it was not an outlandish claim.\textsuperscript{33}

Wanamaker’s vision of France painted a rosy picture of fruitful exchange between the two countries, but that belied the reality of worsening Franco-American trade relations. The French chafed constantly at American tariff rates and sought repeatedly to lower them. Although trade officials representing both countries established a satisfactory tariff reciprocity agreement in 1899, many French exporters and officials were angered by the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act seven years later in 1906 under the Roosevelt Administration. A great many French insisted that the progressive reform was, in fact, a “badly disguised tactic for protecting American producers.”\textsuperscript{34} The president of the Lyons Silk Manufacturers Syndicate further complained that American customs officials enforced tariffs arbitrarily and always to their own benefit. Such frustrations over tariffs were mutual. Much to the chagrin of American officials, the United States was the only commercially advanced nation excluded from French minimum tariff rate policies without exceptions. In this respect, France officially


classified the United States alongside undeveloped (and non-European) countries such as Haiti, Ethiopia, and the Congo. In stark contrast to this distressing picture of Franco-American trade relations, promotions for the Wanamaker’s stores insisted that “our business connections with the French people were never so cordial, important, and sympathetic as at this time.” Alongside an editorial-style advertisement celebrating the historic connections between the two countries, Wanamaker’s presented a sketch of George Washington meeting the Marquis de Lafayette alongside a portrait of the contemporary French president. Advertisements claimed that France and United States were tied together through a shared history, but also through Wanamaker’s extensive trade in Paris, which cemented “a stronger link between the two great republics.”

Amid rising tensions over Franco-American trade relations, William Howard Taft announced his candidacy for President of the United States and made tariff reform central to his campaign platform. A lawyer from Ohio who preferred the quiet study of the law to the rough and tumble partisanship of campaigns and elections, Taft sorely lacked the political skills of his friend and predecessor, Roosevelt. He nonetheless took a stand against a policy that had been a central tenet of Republican Party doctrine for more than half a century: protectionism. That is, the setting of high tariffs to “protect” American industries and workers against competition from foreign imports. Longtime GOP leaders supported protectionist tariffs because it suited their vision of using the power of the federal government to promote business enterprise. Beyond Washington the doctrine

35 Blumenthal, France and the United States, 234-236.
36 Founder’s Day Address with Statements of the Thirtieth Anniversary Month, March 1906, 54-55, WC HSP.
appealed to Republicans because high tariffs seemed to embody patriotism, promise social cohesion, and guard against poverty. However, after the turn of the century a growing number of progressive Republicans had begun to break with Old Guard conservatives by advocating for reductions. Tariff reform became so sharply divisive within the GOP that Roosevelt had largely ignored it during his presidency in order to preserve party unity. In fact, Roosevelt had strongly encouraged leading Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge to “manage the tariff bill to give Taft the chance to appear” an effective champion of reduction, even if his efforts to pass the bill through congress failed. Neither Lodge nor Taft seemed to take Roosevelt’s advice seriously and the President vowed again and again during the first year of his presidency to reduce tariffs. He was convinced that tariffs ought to be revised, as he wrote, “from time to time, schedule by schedule based on the reports of a nonpartisan board of experts.” He even went so far as to suggest that the independent commission ought to be established to “remove politics from the tariff.”

As much as Wanamaker represented the Old Guard in terms of his age, wealth, and connections to former Presidents Harrison and McKinley, he was, in fact, one of a growing number of progressive Republicans who tried to advocate for more moderate tariff schedules without undermining the core principles of protection. Wanamaker had known Taft for at least twenty years by the time the he won his bid for the presidency in

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1908; the two had met when Wanamaker served under President Benjamin Harrison as Postmaster General and Taft as U.S. Solicitor General.\footnote{In an address he gave at the opening of Wanamaker’s new Philadelphia store in 1911, Taft mentioned that he became acquainted with Wanamaker during Harrison’s presidency, but the two seem to have become closer friends during Taft’s presidential campaign in 1908. See Gibbons, \textit{John Wanamaker}, 236; Appel and Hodges, vol. I, 1-15.} When Taft announced his campaign Wanamaker had come to his aid and gave several interviews on his behalf, in which tariff reform and “protection” played a key role. “The Republican Party is the only party that believes in and understands the tariff,” Wanamaker told the \textit{New York Tribune}, “and its patriotism commands it to meet the views of the people by moderating the present tariff in careful ways that will not upset the business of the country.” Wanamaker was not only careful to point out that “moderating” the tariff could be as patriotic as raising it, but also that American businesses would benefit from the stability that Taft’s proposal promised. That is, through a “gradual approach” towards “a more satisfactory tariff.” He argued that hardworking Americans were tired of financial panics and that only Taft’s tariff reductions could bring stability.\footnote{“Taft Victory Expected,” \textit{New York Tribune}, November 3, 1908, 1. Gibbons, \textit{John Wanamaker}, vol. 2, 236-7.} Just as Taft proposed to “remove politics from the tariff,” Wanamaker believed that businessmen independent of political parties ought to study the reduction of tariffs and other forms taxation to reduce the cost of doing business and the prices of goods. As he later told an assemblage of American retailers in New York, the tariff ought to be reduced to a point that would “revive the dying spirit of inventors, designers, and workmen of American enterprise, whom the high
manufacturer’s tariff has hindered.”^40 What he neglected to mention, of course, was that high tariffs had also hindered retailers dependent on imports of Paris fashions.

Despite the fact that he won the White House by a solid margin, Taft lost the larger battle against high protective tariffs at great cost to his own credibility and, as many believed, to consumers across the country. During the summer of 1909 staunch protectionists outmaneuvered Taft and by August he was compelled to pass the Payne Aldrich bill, which reduced rates on only a handful of hundreds of imported items. The defeat undermined Taft’s credibility for the rest of his presidency and angered nearly everyone. Even many conservative Republicans who endorsed Payne Aldrich felt that the bill reduced some rates to unacceptable lows. At the same time, advocates of tariff reform and Democratic free traders argued that the bill had accomplished far too little. When Taft took off on a cross-country speaking tour months after signing the bill he further angered critics by defensively calling Payne Aldrich a triumph for the Republican Party. At the midterm elections the GOP sustained heavy losses and gave up control of the House to Democrats.^41 Beyond Washington and across the Atlantic, too, Payne Aldrich infuriated the French and sparked talk of reprisals and an open tariff war. The bill terminated the 1899 reciprocity agreements that had stabilized (to some degree) Franco-American trade relations and introduced new rates that doubled the cost of some French imports.^42 Writers at *Le Temps* who were typically friendly to the United States argued

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^42 Schweitzer, “American Fashions,” 137.
that, “The uncompromising protectionists of America have made the game easy for the protectionists of France,” signifying their intentions to hike rates on American exports.\footnote{Quoted in Blumenthal, \textit{France and the United States}, 235.} Always sympathetic with the French, Wanamaker wrote a piece for the pro-tariff journal \textit{American Economist}, in which he protested the excessive increase on rates for French imports. Regardless, Payne Aldrich remained the new law of the trade.\footnote{“France Blusters,” \textit{American Economist}, February 4, 1910, 51; Also see: “Acute Tariff Difficulties with France,” \textit{American Economist}, July 16, 1909, 1, 36.}

Across the country popular resentment surged from wage-earning Americans who blamed high tariffs for what many called the “high cost of living.” Although the national economy seemed to be in recovery by the summer and fall of 1909, Americans continued to find themselves “in a vise between their expenditures and their income.”\footnote{Jacobs, \textit{Pocketbook Politics}, 15-16. Also see, Gould, \textit{The William Howard Taft Presidency}, 49-50.} In fact, the consumer price index was rising faster than wages and many workers struggled to keep pace. The Republican Party absorbed much of the public blame for the high cost of living and Payne Aldrich failed to reverse that trend. A growing number of wage earners believed that high tariffs stifled competition and increased prices. As one columnist for the \textit{New York Times} argued, high tariffs seemed to cause a paucity of quality, affordable clothing across the country. Although the rich “tariff fixers” escaped the “monstrous inequality” wrought by Payne Aldrich, the columnist argued that the poor, working classes, so often held up as the “shameless pretext” of protectionism, were actually its victims. Heavy tariffs on imported woolens, for example, made them prohibitively expensive for most American workers. “The working classes get a lot of sham woolen...
cloths made of cotton and shoddy, deficient in warmth, weak in weave, rotten in texture, and haven’t one tenth the wear in them of real woolen fabrics.” Critiques of Payne Aldrich written in defense of American consumers, became so prevalent that Lodge went on the defensive, denigrating what he called the “myth of the consuming public.” Lodge, like many Old Guard Republicans, persisted in his view of the nation as one centered on the values and needs of producers. “Where is this separate and isolated public of consumers? … This is a Nation of Producers,” he insisted. In the wake of Payne Aldrich, Lodge’s views were as unpopular as they were inaccurate. By 1909 more Americans identified as consumers than as producers, a fact that Democratic free-traders and other critics of Payne Aldrich understood and used to their advantage.

Payne Aldrich brought into sharp relief a growing movement among cash-strapped Americans for lower prices on consumer goods, but it also raised questions about the role of foreign imports in American life. While consumers in favor of free trade and cheaper goods banded together to foster the rise of a “bargain hunting ethos,” an opposing group still sympathetic to the core principles of protection rallied behind calls for an end to high-priced Paris imports. Both movements viewed price as central to their demands. Prices were the raison d’être for bargain hunters and a means to another end for fashion nationalists: the development of a distinctly American fashion industry that operated independently of Paris. Just as free-traders and protectionists had done for decades, bargain hunters and fashion nationalists each argued that their vision was

47 Quoted in Jacobs, Pocketbook Politics, 39.
48 This term is from Jacob, Pocketbook Politics. See ibid., 24.
patriotic and good for Americans. On the one hand, bargain hunters pictured a nation in which wage-earners could afford to buy a middle-class standard of living because it was cheap. On the other hand, fashion nationalists pictured a nation in which American manufacturers and designers earned high wages producing goods that would liberate the national culture from the influence of Europe. Neither movement was good for the country’s leading retailers who became trapped in a vice not only between bargain hunters and high spenders, but also between fashion nationalists and those who demanded styles from Paris. For John Wanamaker, longtime member of the Republican establishment and an old friend of Taft, the backlash to Payne Aldrich must have felt particularly acute. Moreover, Wanamaker and his son had spent the better part of two decades building up their trade in Paris and cementing their reputation as a business that could satisfy the demands of the much vaunted, high-spending “carriage trade” for the latest in haute couture. Though Lodge may have believed the consuming public to be a mythical creation of anti-protection Democrats, Wanamaker encountered them everyday in his stores and knew that to keep his business in the black he would have to find the middle ground between bargains and luxuries and between the United States and Paris.

The Failure of Fashion Nationalism and the Rise of “American Made”

More than thirty thousand people gathered in the breathtaking, eight-story Grand Court at Wanamaker’s newly erected flagship store in Philadelphia on December 30, 1911. Among them were many distinguished bankers and businessmen, officers in the
United States Army, the mayor of Philadelphia, the governor of Pennsylvania, several U.S. Supreme Court justices, and one U.S. senator. Although the event marked the official dedication of the imposing fourteen-story building and celebrated fifty years of business for John Wanamaker, the real attraction was the keynote speaker, President Taft. 49 Outside the new building, twenty thousand more people crowded the streets hoping to catch a glimpse of the president as he arrived for the ceremony. When Taft entered the Grand Court, a military-style band played a joyful rendition of Meyerbeer’s Coronation March with accompaniment from the forty-seven foot high organ embedded in the store’s walls. Originally built for the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, it was (and still is) the largest pipe-playing organ in the world. Though Taft spoke only for a few minutes, his words were very carefully chosen. The President celebrated Wanamaker as the “greatest merchant in America,” whose business had provided “a model for all other stores throughout the country and throughout the world.” Wanamaker’s was, he argued, the “highest type of one of the most important instrumentalities in modern life for the promotion of comfort among men.” Taft expressed his admiration for Wanamaker’s success in “reducing the cost of living” and providing for the “betterment of the condition of men” through the sale of consumer goods at the “lowest, reasonable, and fixed prices.” 50 Just ten months ahead of the bitterly contested presidential election of 1912, Taft’s speech offered much more than a dedication to Wanamaker’s new building or a

49 The Wanamaker firm claimed that the store, with its forty-five acres of floor space was the largest retail building in the world. See Joseph Herbert Appel and Leigh Mitchell Hodges, comps., Golden Book of the Wanamaker Stores, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: John Wanamaker, 1911), 277.
50 For a transcript of this speech, as well as a description, photos, and newspaper excerpts from the event see Appel and Hodges, vol. I., 1-15. For the details and history of the Wanamaker organ, see Appel and Hodges, vol. II, 189-195.
toast to his fifty years in business. Instead the president seemed to offer up Wanamaker’s 
business as the solution to the financial problems Americans faced. Where his 
administration had failed to reduce the cost of living, Wanamaker’s stores in Philadelphia 
and New York had succeeded.

Despite the disappointment of Payne Aldrich, Wanamaker remained by Taft’s 
side throughout his first term and even became one of the president’s most ardent 
supporters in the American business community. Yet when Taft spoke at the dedication 
of Wanamaker’s new flagship store, he did not say anything that Americans did not 
already know. The firm had already positioned itself as an ally to consumers fighting 
against the high cost of living and Taft was, in a sense, repeating Wanamaker’s own 
promotional rhetoric on a much grander stage—albeit a stage erected inside 
Wanamaker’s store. However, the President’s address came just before fashion 
nationalism, a movement spearheaded by Edward Bok, the influential editor of *Ladies 
Home Journal*, began to grab major national headlines in the *New York Times* and win 
support among influential men sympathetic to the language of cultural nationalism as 
well as protectionist economic policies. Fashion nationalists were not only engaged in a 
long-running conversation about the development of a national style, they were also 
savvy political opportunists. They did not see the high rates in Payne Aldrich as a 
problem so much as an opportunity to capitalize on bargain hunters’ demands by 
redirecting them towards American industries and away from Paris. But Wanamaker, 
America’s leading retailer, was neither a staunch protectionist nor a cultural nationalist. 
While retailers in the middle of the country had less trouble adapting to the anti-Paris
rhetoric of fashion nationalism, industry leaders on the east coast compromised by promoting the qualities of dresses designed in Paris and yet “American made.” Much to the chagrin of Bok and his followers, Wanamaker’s developed its most compelling campaign in defense of American industry only when the firm’s founder felt threatened by Woodrow Wilson’s sweeping financial reforms in 1913. Where bargain hunters had easily won over the retail industry, fashion nationalists had not. On the eve of the First World War there was very little sense of any national American style in fashion. The retailers who brokered the culture of fashion might have agreed that “American made” was no longer anathema and that low prices were unavoidable, but neither of these qualities mattered as much as whether or not a dress followed Paris styles.

In the aftermath of Payne Aldrich, the “bargain hunting ethos” that spread across the country threatened to undermine sales at department stores that had, up to that time, avoided any special focus on low prices. During the first decade of the century large-scale stores built around low-price promotions, such as J.C. Penney’s and Sears, proliferated across the country, and in 1909 Filene’s department store in Boston pushed into the center of the movement. With the opening of the Automatic Bargain Basement in 1909, Filene’s virtually “institutionalized the idea of the bargain” even as the store continued to sell expensive fashions from Paris. The omnipresence of bargain hunters, however, threatened one of Wanamaker’s core principles, which he had insisted on for more than thirty years. In 1880 a Wanamaker’s sales catalogue boasted that: “Goods are

51 Bargain sales were hardly new to retailers, but as Jacobs contends, they did not become so central to the consumer experience until this period. See Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 24.
not marked up at the start of the season and afterwards frightfully reduced. We start at the low prices that many of the storekeepers end with at the close of the season.”

Twenty years later, this sentiment remained at the heart of a pamphlet listing Wanamaker’s cardinal principles, “fair prices for everything to everyone alike without hidden reservations or concessions.” Wanamaker’s had never run “bargain” sales because, not unlike contemporary Wal-Mart and its “everyday low prices,” the firm maintained that the regular prices were already “fair.” Still, in 1909 Wanamaker’s buyers and department heads in New York and Philadelphia submitted numerous proposals to introduce more creative bargain sales. John wrote to his son Rodman in shock. He could “hardly believe” that his buyers wanted to implement “hour sales” along the lines of those offered by the low-class discount stores on Manhattan’s Fourteenth Street. “It would be an imitation of the Jewish practices,” Wanamaker exclaimed, “that we do not want to follow.”

Wanamaker’s desire to distance himself from discount retailers was certainly bigoted, but it was also more than that. Macy’s of New York, which was owned by the American Jewish Straus family and whom Wanamaker knew well, also took a strong stance against hour sales and sought to distinguish themselves from the discount stores.

Like Wanamaker’s, Macy’s had also developed a large following in the Paris trade and none

52 John Wanamaker Grand Depot Catalogue No. 3 Spring and Summer, 1880, WC HSP.
54 John Wanamaker to Rodman Wanamaker, letter, February 18, 1909, WC HSP.
55 A survey of The Evening World reveals that discount stores run by American Jews, such as Rothenberg & Co. on Fourteenth Street, regularly offered sales that lasted only for a select number of hours. See “Macy’s,” The Sun, July 30, 1905, 24.
of their wealthy patrons who could afford haute couture would willingly associate with a store that endorsed bargain schemes.

To solve this conundrum, Wanamaker’s buyers and advertisers reappropriated the “high cost of living” rhetoric that had captivated bargain hunters and imbued it with a new sense of national purpose. By fighting against the high cost of living, Wanamaker’s aligned itself with a national cause, rather than the déclassé world of discount stores. When the firm opened a new, low priced clothing store for men the advertising copy explained that the garments were priced for “those earning low wages and facing the constantly increasing cost of living.” Sales on women’s suits were advertised as the latest “captures” in the firm’s “war against the high cost of living.” Another promotion claimed that Wanamaker’s provided an important “service” in the current “emergency” by offering prices that “relieved any congestion of the market on one side and lowered the high cost of living on the other.”

In 1911, Wanamaker’s followed Filene’s into the bargain basement business, but at no point did the store characterize its efforts as having anything to do with bargains. Instead, Wanamaker’s opened a “New Kind of Clothing Store.” Promotional materials explained that the New Store’s “reason for being is the universal and insistent need for the right sort of low priced merchandise.” Wanamaker’s advertisers regularly drew parallels between the quality of its shoppers and the quality of its low-priced merchandise: “The people of Philadelphia are not ‘half-price’ or ‘third off”

people, nor are they after cheap goods.” Wanamaker’s promotions cast the “New Kind of Clothing Store” as a “modified” bargain basement that served quality people with quality clothing at prices that served the national good. As yet another advertisement explained, the New Store emerged out of public necessity: “It came because it had to come.” At Wanamaker’s low prices were “fair” and catered not to bargain hunters, but to working Americans who needed them. When Taft credited Wanamaker for reducing the cost of living in his dedication of the new store in 1911, he echoed Wanamaker’s own promotional tactics. Wanamaker’s rhetoric informed Taft’s speech, rather than the other way around.

Yet if Wanamaker found a way to position his firm as the answer to a consumer movement for low prices though clever shifts in rhetoric, managing growing frustrations with the Paris trade would prove more challenging, not least because of the influential figure who raised those frustrations in the first place: Edward Bok, editor of *Ladies Home Journal (LHJ)*. Although Bok filled *LHJ* with folksy, first person editorials, in much the same manner as the advice columnist Dorothy Dix, he was anything but folksy. Bok had arrived in the United States as a poor Dutch immigrant at the age of seven and rose to wealth and prominence in the publishing world by the turn of the century. Bok’s Dutch ancestry was something he shared with Roosevelt and the young editor managed to cultivate a long-lasting friendship with the Bull Moose, in part by offering him an opportunity to speak directly to more than two million *LHJ* readers in a regular column. Roosevelt accepted the offer and Bok printed his columns (half based on interviews, half

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based on dictation), which advocated various aspects of the “strenuous life,” by encouraging women to pursue the moral education of children and to “strive for better civic conditions.” In his bestselling memoir, the appropriately titled *Americanization of Edward Bok*, the writer reminisced about his early bond with Roosevelt: “We must work for the same ends,” Roosevelt had once told him, “You and I can each become good Americans by giving our best to make America better.”58 Beyond offering Roosevelt his own space in *LHJ*, Bok also used his editorial clout to promote Roosevelt’s progressive reforms. For example, a series of editorials condemning “quackery” in in the patent-medicine industry built public support for the passage of Roosevelt’s Pure Food & Drug Act in 1906. Bok also tapped into Roosevelt’s vision for the “simple life” when he, like Roosevelt, endorsed the Arts and Crafts movement as a path away from Victorian bric-a-brac and towards the simplification of American architecture and interior design.59 *LHJ* was not always, as these campaigns suggest, a mouthpiece for Roosevelt or progressive reforms, but in Bok’s hands it certainly could be.

Although fashion nationalism did not gain real momentum until the winter of 1911-1912, Bok began the campaign in *LHJ* in 1909—just two months after Taft signed Payne Aldrich into law. When Bok debuted the first “department” devoted to “American Fashions for American Women” in *LHJ* he initiated what would become the first modern campaign in fashion nationalism. In his editorials, Bok couched what was fundamentally

a movement for economic nationalism, consistent with Republican principles of
protection, in a more broadly appealing call for the development of a domestic fashion
industry. As one historian has noted, there is no question that the American Fashions
movement was a “concerted attempt to reshape consumer desires in accordance with
national economic interests.” Bok saw in the backlash to Payne Aldrich an opportunity
to direct bargain hunters away from expensive foreign imports and towards a new form of
cultural nationalism rooted in the most visible and attention-getting of consumer goods:
women’s fashions. He began by selling small batches of sewing patterns designed in the
United States and produced by the popular Home Pattern Company. When he discovered
how limited the selections of American patterns were, however, Bok began running
nationwide contests with cash prizes to encourage LHJ readers to submit their own
original designs. He appealed to women by arguing that fashion design was “a new and
truly feminine way, right at home, of making money,” an attitude that tied in neatly with
Roosevelt’s columns championing mothers as heroines of the strenuous life from the
confines of their own homes. Finding styles that could be called uniquely American
proved to be one of Bok’s greatest challenges. In February 1910, LHJ featured twenty
pictures of “American-designed hats,” which were offered as evidence that it was
possible for America to “originate its own fashions.” But these, too, displayed all manner
of foreign influence: one was labeled a “toque,” and another was a “Spanish turban.”
Although the copy claimed that these styles were “purely American designs without any
regard to Paris,” any woman who followed haute couture knew better.60

60 Schweitzer, “American Fashions,”137-139; Dalton, Theodore Roosevelt, 305.
Much as Roosevelt took aim at British spellings of words in order to assert American cultural independence, Bok had to take aim at Paris to distinguish America from the world’s fashion capital. Early on Bok’s critiques of Paris fashions flattered American women by appealing to their patriotism, economy, and ingenuity. In an advertisement promoting American fashions in *Vogue*, the campaign balanced a polite rebuke of Paris with nationalism: “No More Paris Alone in Women’s Clothes; But Paris with America.”

In *LHJ*, Bok contrasted American and French women by celebrating the former’s “New World cleverness,” and insisting that only Americans understood the needs and desires of other Americans. As the campaign expanded, however, Bok changed his measured tone towards Paris. By 1912 *LHJ* had sold hundreds of thousands of “original” American sewing patterns and Bok managed to secure a partnership with the *New York Times*. With the support of the *Times* behind him, Bok ran even better publicized nationwide contests for original American designs and gained a new audience of predominantly male readers. In his *Times* columns, Bok preyed on male readers’ fears about the ill effects of French decadence on American society—and American women, in particular. He characterized innovative Paris fashions, such as Paul Poiret’s radical sheath and hobble skirts, as grotesque, freakish, and unfeminine. American women, Bok alleged, had been “duped” by greedy and corrupt French couturiers into wearing clothes designed not for respectable French women, but rather for Parisian *demimondaines*. Bok

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62 These critiques were rooted in the kind of rhetoric that underpinned Roosevelt’s promotion of the “martial spirit” at the turn of the century. See Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
and the male reformers, mostly conservative businessmen, who backed his campaign
drew on “melodramatic tropes” to position themselves as “valiant heroes out to rescue
American women from the evil clutches of Paris couturiers.”

The harsh tone against Paris resonated with many consumers and retailers across
the middle of the country partly because they found the increasingly outré fashions
pouring out of the workshops of radical French designers, such as Paul Poiret,
undesirable. In Michigan a news correspondent wrote that Paris designers had been
“shockingly overdoing it of late,” and another newswriter in Idaho attributed the success
of the American Fashions movement there to the “extreme manifestations” of Paris
skirts. In a follow up to her first column endorsing American fashions, Dix called the
recent designs pouring out of Paris “monstrosities.” “Such styles,” she argued, “do not
suit the sensible, practical, clean-minded woman-hood of young America. American
women with their liberty have no business in hobble skirts.” Even the Chicago-based
Dry Goods Reporter, the most influential retailing and manufacturing trade journal
outside the east coast, joined the campaign. In 1912, the Reporter published a fashion
issue that was not only “broadly and distinctly” American, but also censured those who
continued to defer to Paris: “We do not believe in becoming such blind worshippers at
the shrine of French fashions that we fail to give American fashions the pre-eminence to

64 Valerie Steele, Paris Fashion: A Cultural History: Also, Marlis Schweitzer offers a nice summary of
how Poiret’s designs, which dramatically reimagined the female silhouette, challenged gender norms. See
Schweitzer, “American Fashions,” 132-34.
66 Dix, “American Clothes.”
which they are rightly entitled.”\textsuperscript{67} Such widespread support in the middle of the country for rhetoric that denigrated Paris and contributed to a sense of American cultural superiority proved a boon to fashion nationalism, and cast the movement as patriotic. In the spring of 1913, even First Lady Ellen Wilson and her daughters declared their personal support for fashion nationalism in \textit{LHJ} and posed for photographs while wearing original American designs.\textsuperscript{68}

In the large commercial centers on the east coast, however, retailers were far less inclined to endorse any critique of Paris. Many responded to the growing popularity of fashion nationalism by drawing attention to American manufactures, rather than commenting on original American fashion designs. In 1912 Filene’s of Boston announced it was adopting a new “America first” buying policy: “We would rather hear the busy hum of American mills than the fog-horns of inbound transatlantic steamships,” the firm exclaimed. The New York-based trade journal \textit{Dry Goods Economist} reprinted Filene’s advertisements and urged, “Let us have more American goods and more American weeks!”\textsuperscript{69} Both Filene’s and the \textit{Dry Goods Economist} embraced the patriotic impulse behind fashion nationalism without undermining the ultimate authority of Paris couturiers. Large east coast retailers emphasized American manufactures over American fashion designs for several important reasons. First, they knew that fashion nationalists did not have the power to redirect the international fashion industry; only highly visible,

\textsuperscript{68} “The President’s Wife” and “Personally Selected American-Designed Fashions by Mrs. Woodrow Wilson,” \textit{Ladies Home Journal}, April 1913, 1, 28-29; Schweitzer, “American Fashions,” 145.
\textsuperscript{69} “Push American Goods!” \textit{Dry Goods Economist}, September 28, 1912, 35.
wealthy women had that kind of influence. The world of fashion, as the society pages of *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* and every other fashion magazine made clear, was governed by aristocrats, not upstart reformers. In 1912 the *Dry Goods Economist*, leading trade journal and eastern counterpart to the *Dry Goods Reporter*, made this point when the publication defended its loyalty to Paris: “As long as the average American woman follows the fashion standard upraised by her wealthy sisters, and as long as the wealthy American woman accepts the international mode, so long will our fashions continue to originate in [Paris].” Second, in the more cosmopolitan cities along the east coast consumers found the new designs from Paris fascinating, even if they were radical. In 1913, Americans stood in line for hours outside Wanamaker’s to catch a glimpse of Paul Poiret on his widely publicized American tour. In 1914, sixty thousand New Yorkers paid to see an exhibition of dresses designed by Parisian Madame Paquin. Finally, even if there were an American design industry in which retailers might have invested, that would have required a significant shift in each firm’s buying operations. Promoting American manufactures, on the other hand, required no changes in buying. American retailers already possessed in their stocks plenty of fashions made in America—they just did not advertise them as such.

As Bok learned early in his campaign the United States had no fashion design industry to speak of, but it did have a booming clothing manufacturing industry. As the

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70 Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*, 71-73.
73 Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*, 59.
highly structured hoop skirts and complex, custom designed fashions of the nineteenth century gave way to the ready-made cloaks, shirtwaists, women’s suits, and dresses of the twentieth, the American garment industry witnessed spectacular growth. Between 1870 and 1900, capital investment in garment production increased threefold, from $54 to $169 million, and the size of the labor force nearly doubled, from 120,000 to 206,000 workers. During the first two decades of the twentieth century more than half all garment workers labored in New York City, which became the undisputed “fashion capital” of the United States.74 What made Manhattan a fashion capital, however, was not its creativity or originality in design, but rather its capacity for the mass production of standardized, ready-made clothes. And although many American women who could afford it continued to patronize dressmakers and tailors, by 1914 very few could claim not to own a ready-made garment manufactured in the United States.75 More than ninety percent of the inventory across all departments at Wanamaker’s, including everything from home furnishings to sports equipment, was produced in the United States. However, although there are no statistics on the percentage of imported goods sold in Wanamaker’s women’s dress department, the scale of the firm’s trade in Paris suggests that imports had a much greater role in that department than, say, in kitchenware. Nonetheless, Wanamaker’s buyers knew very well that no matter how far from France a garment was produced, promotions succeeded when they emphasized proximity to Paris trends.76

76 See Appel, Business Biography, 407.
Although retailers had long since advertised American made clothing in sometimes vague terms that suggested they originated in Paris, fashion nationalists reframed the practice as dishonest and un-American. At department stores, buyers promoted the garments they purchased in New York as “Paris styles,” or even (more deceptively) as “Paris originals” or “Paris imports,” if they followed designs that originate in Paris.77 As a Wanamaker’s menswear buyer explained to the New York Times, his firm spent thousands of dollars buying style samples in Europe that he and other buyers brought back across the Atlantic to the United States to be reproduced. They negotiated contracts with American manufacturers for exclusive rights to the mass reproduction of the original samples, which might be sold only at Wanamaker’s, or in some cases, at a handful of other approved stores.78 However, in 1912, a cover story in LHJ labeled this common practice a “countrywide swindle.” Dix alleged that 90% of so-called “imported” gowns that American women purchased in department stores were merely exported from New York’s Sixth Avenue and given “bogus” Paris labels.79 In the spring of 1913, respected muckraker Samuel Hopkins Adams published a report in LHJ that revealed the use of fraudulent Paris labels at major department stores was so widespread an entire branch of the weaving industry was devoted to producing realistic label forgeries. Adams posited that more than two and a half million articles of women’s

79 Most likely Dix was referring to Seventh Avenue, the center of New York’s garment trade. See Green, Ready to Wear, 44-73. Dix, “American Fashions.”
clothing with false Paris labels were on sale every day in department stores across the country. Retailers defended the practice, suggesting that American shoppers were complicit in accepting false labels. “Any woman knows that she can’t get a new Paris hat for twenty dollars,” one unnamed retailer told Adams, “If she doesn’t, she’s a fool and she deserves to get swindled.”

Although Adams highlighted Wanamaker’s as one of the more honest retailers, archival records indicate that buyers regularly advertised American made garments opaquely as “Paris styles,” and years later the firm publicly admitted that their popular Lyons Velvet was not made in Lyons, France, but in the United States. In the conclusion to his report, Adams blamed consumers and retailers alike for stoking a “French mania among all womankind,” when, in fact, much of the well-made merchandise on store shelves was more American than it was French.

For decades Wanamaker’s had insisted that America could not produce fashions at the level of the French, but as fashion nationalism gained headlines in LHJ and the New York Times the firm began to promote the uniquely American made qualities of fashions that followed Paris designs. In a 1911 promotion, Joseph Appel, director of advertising, had emphasized the country’s youth in art and fashion relative to Europe. “America is still a pioneering country,” he explained, “She is still at work on the firing line, conquering the soil. She has not the leisure yet to give to Art and Fashions.” John Wanamaker himself was so convinced of the inferiority of American creativity that he

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81 Buyers Meeting, August 6, 1914, WC HSP; See “Wanamaker Marks Lyons Velvet as Made in American,” Women’s Wear Daily 1918 (n.d.).

82 In promotional materials, Wanamaker’s explained that the United States was still a “pioneering country” without the “leisure to give to art and fashion.” Appel and Hodges, Golden Book, 194, 275.
had developed his own “laboratories” to “plan, originate, and make” a wide variety of original designs. He explained privately to his son that the point of these laboratories was to produce some American goods that might be equal to foreign goods. By 1911 Wanamaker’s had laboratories developing American toilet products, bedding, candy, shirts, and more. Also see: Annals of the Wanamaker System: Its Origins, Its Principles, Its Methods, and Its Development in this and other Cities, 1899, WC HSP; John Wanamaker to Rodman Wanamaker, letter, January 8, 1909, WC HSP; See Appel and Hodges, Golden Book, 187.

Increasingly, though, Wanamaker’s informed consumers that buyers pursued a strict “America and Philadelphia FIRST buying policy,” and only went abroad “for goods that could not be so well bought in our home city, our home state, and our home country.” By 1912, Wanamaker’s took great care to emphasize the fact that many of its Paris styles were made in America. One advertisement reminded shoppers that Paris had “a natural effect on many of the American made articles that come into the Wanamaker stores.” Even in Vogue, a high-end fashion magazine with intense loyalty to Paris, Wanamaker’s advertisements asserted the role of American manufacturers in their Paris fashions. “The influence of Paris on the American-made gowns can hardly be overestimated,” one advertisement read. Advertisements such as these expressed a sense of national pride in American industry even as they stoked the “French mania” that Samuel Hopkins Adams criticized in his LHJ report on false labels.

Although fashion nationalism emerged in the wake of Payne Aldrich in 1909, Bok and his supporters grabbed national headlines during the most hotly contested presidential election in American history; and one that brought both John Wanamaker

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84 Methods of Gathering Merchandise, Wanamaker Originator, 1909, WC HSP.
85 “What the Progressive Woman Wants to Know About the John Wanamaker Store,” Vogue, October 1, 1912, 7.
and tariffs back into the national spotlight. In the year following Taft’s dedication of Wanamaker’s new flagship store in Philadelphia, Wanamaker became one of the president’s biggest supporters in the American business community. So much so, that he even received a nomination to run as vice president on Taft’s reelection ticket. At the contentious Republican National Convention Wanamaker gave the speech seconding the party’s nomination of Taft and later wrote several widely circulated articles on the president’s behalf. Tariff reform was, once again, central to the election. In a widely circulated open letter to Wanamaker, Taft argued that a vote for Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson was a “vote for economic experimentation.” He insisted that Democratic proposals to shift from a protective (high) to a revenue (low) tariff threatened the ruin of American industry, a spike in unemployment, and a drastic reduction of wages. “For sixty years under the protective policy our industries have grown at a pace which has astonished the world,” Taft reminded readers, “and our wage earners have maintained a standard of living which is unknown elsewhere.” In defense of the failings of his own administration, Taft offered that Americans were still more prosperous than Europeans “even during this period of the high cost of living… our people have suffered no such hardships as those of the old world.” As progressive Republicans, Wanamaker and Taft had championed tariff reductions, but not nearly to the level that Wilson had proposed if elected. Alas, when Wilson came out ahead in November, Wanamaker cursed

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86 He was a very distant second to the eventual nominee, Herbert Hadley. See “Taft and Hadley the Ticket of the Republican Party,” New York Tribune, November 4, 1912.
Roosevelt for his third party bid and reflected in his diary that the whole affair was a “pity of pities.” After Wilson’s inauguration on March 4, 1913, Wanamaker noted, Americans ought to: “look out for squalls.”

As sales lagged during the country’s transition from Taft to Wilson, Wanamaker blamed the incoming Democrat’s proposed financial reforms for causing widespread uncertainty in the markets. Wanamaker announced to his buyers that too many departments were falling far short of the expected annual increase of ten percent in sales over the previous year. “The present time in business is a very serious one because the condition of the country is serious,” he told them. Wilson had proposed a spate of financial reforms, including the establishment of the Federal Reserve banking system, the introduction of a Federal income tax, and a series of tariff revisions that would usher in the lowest rates in six decades. Wanamaker feared the effects of so many adjustments to the country’s financial systems and felt certain that American jobs were in jeopardy.

During the summer of 1913, he cautioned his buyers and sales clerks that American shoppers were “holding their money” and “uncertain about the future.” “We can’t expect people to do anything else,” he explained, “we all know that it is not possible that the employment [levels] of previous years can go on under a tariff that does not protect the people who make the goods.” To Wanamaker, workers’ wages and sales revenues were two sides of the same coin: by threatening the job security of wage earners, Wilson’s...

90 Buyers Meeting, November 25, 1913, WC HSP.
92 See Buyers Meetings, June 17 & July 8, 1913, WC HSP.
financial policies undermined retail sales. To address his fears about what the country might look like under Wilson and to stimulate sales, Wanamaker appointed a special committee tasked with developing new sales strategies. Before long a more deliberate sales campaign emerged centered not only on American manufactures, but also on the merits of American workmanship.

Wanamaker’s emphasis on American workers in 1913 store promotions was unabashedly protectionist, but it did not approach the kind of cultural or “fashion” nationalism that Bok and his fellow reformers demanded. Whereas fashion nationalists praised American dressmakers in order to denigrate Parisian couturiers, Wanamaker’s celebrated American workers for the precision with which they copied Paris styles. In her American Fashions columns, Dix argued that women’s inability to detect false Paris labels was proof that American milliners and dressmakers could “provide the goods” without the help of Paris. Samuel Hopkins Adams struck a similar tone in his *LHJ* report when he exposed the high quality of “American makes” that sales clerks peddled as Paris imports. By contrast, Wanamaker’s advertisements boasted that American-made undergarments were “exact copies of new Paris lingerie,” representing the “best workmanship in America.” Another advertisement praised the “exceptional American workmanship” exhibited in the styles “which Paris says are correct.” Increasingly, headlines announced clothing, “fresh from the workrooms,” and praised American

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93 The committee recommended the firm expand its offerings of low-priced goods and set aside an entire floor devoted to low prices. See *Buyers Meeting*, November 25, 1913, WC HSP.

94 Quoted in Schweitzer, “American Fashions,” 141; Dix also makes an interesting “feminist” argument for women in the dressmaking and design trades as a “common sense, real opportunity” for women to succeed “in their own domain.” See Dix, “American Fashions” and “American Clothes.”

95 Adams, “The Dishonest Paris Label.”
workers for “the cleverness with which they adapt Paris styles.” Wanamaker’s even invited shoppers to an exhibition comparing the workmanship in a handmade American trousseau with a trousseau handmade in Paris for a French Duchesse.\textsuperscript{96} Such concerted emphasis on the exceptional workmanship in American made copies of Paris styles reflected Wanamaker’s fears about the security of American workers under the new Wilson administration, rather than any sense of growing allegiance to the fashion nationalists.

Still, like many retailers Wanamaker’s did adopt one of the most compelling arguments set forth by fashion nationalists, largely because it also satisfied demands from bargain hunters. That is, the fact that American made garments could be sold for less than Paris fashions, whether they were genuinely imported or not. Remarkably, when Dix listed the top five reasons to buy American fashions, “economy” ranked first, and patriotism second. The “French fashion fetish,” she argued, was “grotesquely humorous” because so many women were willing to pay so much of “their husband’s good money” for Paris labels. Adams emphasized the high cost of Paris labels, too, urging shoppers to pay reasonable “American prices” for their clothing.\textsuperscript{97} Although French imports had always been expensive, the high rates set in the Payne Aldrich bill combined with the rising cost of living meant that the average cost of an imported French hat had more than tripled since 1900. And while the total volume of American imports in women’s dress


\textsuperscript{97} See Dix, “American Fashions” and “American Clothes”; Adams, “The Dishonest Paris Label.”
goods and related materials declined fifty percent in the second quarter of 1912, the total value of imports had doubled. At Wanamaker’s American made dresses were typically listed at “extremely low” or “moderate” prices,” and often compared with the higher prices of Paris originals. Headlines featured announcements such as “an expensive suit copied,” or “all suits are adaptations of much more expensive models from Paris.” In 1914 Wanamaker’s opened new “moderately priced millinery salons” inside the New York flagship which specialized in the sale of low cost American copies of French hats. Promotions of American-made garments, especially those that followed Paris designs, folded neatly into Wanamaker’s ongoing “war” against the high cost of living. They even reinforced the idea that low priced sales were offered for the good of the country, rather than as an attempt to pander to bargain hunters.

In 1913 Bok confessed to the advertising department at LHJ that he was disappointed with the progress of his American Fashions campaign. The “Paris idea” was too “deeply embedded in the American woman’s mind.” It was also too deeply embedded in the American retail industry. Two years later Bok would admit to Curtis Publishing, the parent company of LHJ, that fashion nationalism had failed and it was “no use trying to jam it down their throats. For some reason or other they [American women] won’t have American fashions.” But American women were not the only, or

100 “Fresh from the Workrooms,” advertisement, The Evening World, April 3, 1914, 12; New York and the John Wanamaker Store, 56.
even the first brokers of fashion, particularly not when it came to styles imported from Paris. It is not surprising that Wanamaker insisted on keeping up the trade connections that he and his son had spent more than two decades building, and which had become so central to their business that they had redesigned entire sales floors to look like the rue de la Paix. Fashion nationalism cut against longstanding transatlantic retail trade networks, and in Wanamaker’s case, the movement also threatened important political connections. The strict protectionist doctrine that underpinned fashion nationalism did not match the political views of most retailers, not even of John Wanamaker, the most influential Republican among them. At Wanamaker’s, promotions that projected a protectionist view of American workers came only as a reaction to Democratic financial reforms, and never hinted at victory for the fashion nationalists. Despite the traction of their anti-Paris rhetoric in the middle of the country, Bok, Dix, and Adams did not win over the major east coast retailers who shaped the industry. In America’s department stores, Paris prevailed. Despite such considerable efforts to reduce dependence on Paris, the culture of fashion in the United States remained entrenched in Europe.
CHAPTER TWO

Independence Blue and the One Million Dollar Sale:

Patriotism, Politics, and the First World War

Introduction

Frank Tesson, head of the shoe department at Wanamaker’s New York flagship, bought last-minute tickets for Paris. The raw materials needed to make shoes—leathers, dyestuffs and more—had been difficult to procure since the war began in Europe nine months earlier. Tesson took with him a leather goods expert from the firm’s London office, Eugene Posen, and his wife, Alice. John Wanamaker had known Tesson for fifteen years and had personally requested that the head shoe buyer travel to Paris with Posen. Nothing was unusual about the trip except that it was early May 1915, and Tesson had purchased tickets to travel on RMS Lusitania. By some miracle, Posen managed to survive the wreckage by floating in the Irish Sea for nine hours before he was rescued. Frank and Alice Tesson were less fortunate. Wanamaker enlisted buyers stationed at the firm’s London office to work alongside the American consulate there in a fruitless, weeks-long search for the Tessons’ bodies. “It is partly my funeral,”

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Wanamaker told news reporters, “my business family were on board that ship.” He felt deeply and personally responsible for the deaths of Frank and Alice Tesson, who were among the more than one hundred Americans who drowned when a German submarine struck the ship on May 7, 1915. In an editorial advertisement printed one week later, Wanamaker implored Americans: “Whatever race, creed, color or politics we belong to, every native-born citizen, every naturalized citizen, every person seeking for naturalization, must nail up the American flag and take his stand by the president.” He further instructed his more than twelve thousand employees in Philadelphia and New York to pledge support for whatever action President Wilson took “in defense of or for the protection of our fellow citizens.” For Wanamaker, who had campaigned vigorously against Wilson in the presidential election of 1912, the sinking of the *Lusitania* marked a turning point in his attitude towards the war that raged in Europe.

Long before the United States officially entered the First World War in April 1917 American department stores were entrenched in what they referred to as the European War. Prior to the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Americans clamored for some connection to the unsettling events rippling through Europe, and many found it through their local department stores. For these longstanding importers of European merchandise, and especially Paris fashions, Germany’s declaration of war on France in August 1914

interrupted crucial transatlantic supply lines. While many buyers, retailers, and manufacturers hoped that war in Europe might boost domestic manufacturers, stores nevertheless remained awash in Paris fashions for the duration of the war. In fact, during the first year of fighting retailers capitalized on and stoked American interest in the war by promoting Paris fashions as a way of expressing support for the beleaguered French Republic. After the sinking of the Lusitania, however, Americans’ focus turned inward and Wanamaker, still the country’s leading retailer, threw himself into a growing and hawkish movement for national preparedness. Just as Wanamaker often mixed business and politics, he reorganized his staff to bring them in line with the militarism and spirit of conservative preparedness groups like the National Security League. He also invested heavily in the development and promotion of patriotic fashions, a trend that spread quickly across the country. Unlike fashion nationalism, patriotic fashions did not seek to undermine Paris, but rather to inculcate a spirit of national service through the celebration of national symbols in popular styles, from the hats bearing the colors of the American flag to silks named after historic figures like Paul Revere.

Ironically, America’s entry into the First World War halted retailers’ investments in patriotic fashions as department stores moved to the center of some of the country’s most important national mobilization programs, such as Liberty Loan campaigns and fundraising for vital charitable organizations like the American Red Cross. Studies of the United States during the First World War have revealed the extent to which local institutions like schools, churches, and workplaces became conduits for increasing demands from the federal government for citizens to support the war effort. In many
communities a culture of “coercive volunteerism,” fostered by President Wilson, impressed upon Americans their new duties and obligations to the state, and the consequences they risked if they did not comply. What is not often part of this narrative is the extent to which American businesses also participated in the dissemination of patriotic obligations during the war—how they had become agents of the state, a commercial crossroads for meetings between citizens and country—despite the fact that most wartime imperatives cut against their profits. In a sense, retailers turned the narrative of coercive volunteerism on its head. Through a dazzling array of displays and exhibitions, retailers compelled Americans to buy loans or donate to the Red Cross, and they played a key role in raising funds during the war, particularly in small sums from Americans who had little experience with banking and investments. But they did not threaten consequences for those who abstained; fellow citizens, the state, and other organizations did that work. Instead, retailers’ devoted their creative energies towards the manipulation of loan drives to stimulate sales and the appropriation of Wilson’s own turns of phrase, such as “fair prices,” to keep their businesses competitive amid widespread calls for national thrift. By playing a central role in national mobilization programs retailers created new and important links between their stores and the nation.107

Paris and Patriotism in the American Retail Trade

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In July 1914 Mary Walls, a dress buyer for Wanamaker’s stores, crossed the Atlantic to attend the fall openings of the city’s best couturiers. From the outset Walls’ trip was no different from any one of the many other times she had visited Paris, but soon after her arrival the French Ministry of War announced that the city would mobilize to prepare for war. Walls reported that on the night before mobilization French flags streamed down from every window on every boulevard and revelers filled the night air by singing the “Marseillaise” and “Chant du Départ.” The French government had issued warnings urging tourists to leave the city, but Walls stayed. As she later recounted, Walls asked herself: “Have I come three thousand miles for nothing? Shall Americans have no Paris fashions this autumn?” Determined not to return home empty-handed, Walls made her usual rounds of the couturiers, brazenly pushing past crowds eager to secure passports at the American embassy and long lines winding outside ticket offices for rail transportation to seaside ports. When she stopped at the famous atelier run by radical designer Paul Poiret, Walls found him donning the blue and scarlet uniform of a French soldier and consoling a crowd of weeping women. “France needs men today,” Poiret told Walls, “not artists.” She encountered similar scenes at the famous House of Worth, where Jean and Jacques Worth greeted her in their soldiers’ uniforms, and again at Doeulliet’s on Place Vendôme, and again at Béchoff-David. Amid these “heart wrenching” departures of some of the world’s best designers, Walls managed to secure more than two hundred samples of haute couture gowns to bring back to Wanamaker’s stores in New York and Philadelphia. As quickly as she could, Walls had the samples packed in French osier baskets (trunks had been barred from sold-out trains leaving Paris) and began to
make her way to the steamships docked at Le Havre. Although, as Wanamaker’s shoppers would soon learn, that journey would bring another adventure entirely.  

The eruption of war across Europe in the late summer of 1914 sent American retailers into a panic as it threatened to disrupt crucial transatlantic supply lines. For a brief period, retailers and buyers imagined that the moment had come for American manufacturers to step up and produce replacement merchandise that might rival the work of their counterparts in Europe. At Wanamaker’s, however, Walls’ success securing haute couture samples in August 1914 put to rest any fears that Americans might have to go without Paris fashions. In fact, the many “Paris Gowns” exhibitions and promotions that the firm organized upon Walls’ return to the United States stoked a kind of “French mania” that was markedly different from the reverence for aristocratic distinction described by Samuel Hopkins Adams in *Ladies Home Journal* just one year earlier.  

Even as the sinking of the *Lusitania* gave rise to a new investments in hawkish patriotic fashions, the trend did not undermine the influence of Paris. Instead, in the hands of some of the best retail advertisers, patriotic and Paris fashions together made a compelling case for the country to join the Allied Forces. Long before the United States officially entered the First World War, department stores were immersed in developments on the French front and attuned to Americans’ changing attitudes towards Europe and the nation.

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108 *A Woman Carried a Real “Message to Garcia” and so Brought the Paris Gowns of Autumn 1914 to Philadelphia, Traveling in the Midst of War’s Alarms, Through Which No Man Could Pass* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: John Wanamaker, 1914), WC HSP.

109 See Chapter One for more detail on American ideas about Paris.
When Wanamaker’s Paris office shut down along with the city on August 2, 1914, buyers stationed in Philadelphia and New York immediately began planning how to manage their inventories in the absence of imports from Europe. Not a single French employee had stayed behind to package the goods ready for delivery to the United States—even Charles Simonet, the aging director of the office, had been called to service on the front. Gloves buyer William Tompkins who typically purchased sixty-five percent of his inventory in Europe, was desperate to see that a large shipment of Reynier kid gloves manufactured in Grenoble arrived safely. But Tompkins’ department was in better shape than the linen department, where more than ninety percent of stocks were imported from Europe. In early August, Wanamaker received telegrams from lace and linen manufacturers in Belfast requesting permission to ship goods early because future production and transportation seemed so uncertain. After agreeing to the requests, he called an emergency meeting of all buyers across the store and they uniformly agreed to request early, albeit incomplete, shipments from as many manufacturers in Europe as they could. “We had better be prepared” Wanamaker told them, “in a few weeks the war may be over and we can countermand [the early orders].” He further promised that his son Rodman would do “anything that can be done” from the London office to ensure that the shipments arrived safely. Nonetheless, shoe buyers feared that the absence of imported raw materials and dyestuffs would make many of their most popular styles impossible to replace. Buyers in women’s suits and millinery, some of whom had returned from London and Paris just before Germany’s declaration of war, reported that

From the beginning of the war in Europe reports circulated confirming serious disruptions in transatlantic shipping, and retailers and buyers strategized new ways to stay in touch with markets abroad. As a representative of the Chicago wholesale firm John V. Farwell Co. told the \textit{Wall Street Journal}, “nearly every line in the wholesale dry goods field is more or less affected.” Just one month into the war imports of merchandise through New York were already down 15\% from the previous year and U.S. government officials projected that the country would lose 35-40\% of its income from custom duties.\footnote{“Whole Sale Dry Goods,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, August 8, 1914, 3; “Less Custom Revenues,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, August 4, 1914, 8; “Foreign Commerce at New York,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, September 14, 1914, 3.} With his French staff mobilized for war, Wanamaker relied on his son Rodman to keep in touch with the markets and secure shipments from manufacturers in France and Britain.\footnote{See \textit{Buyers Meeting}, August 6, 1914, WC HSP.} Smaller firms that did not yet own trade offices abroad relied on friends and foreign buyers to stay in touch with the markets abroad. At Filene’s in Boston, for example, Louis Kirstein, then the Vice President in charge of merchandising, enlisted his longtime friend Frank Chitham at London’s Selfridge & Co., to advise him as to which goods could be purchased reliably in France or England.\footnote{Edward Filene to Lincoln Filene, letter, November 11, 1914, “Correspondence with Lincoln Filene,” Box 65, Louis Kirstein Papers, Harvard’s Baker Library [hereafter LEK HBL]. Also, for the identification of Frank Chitham, see: “Picked up in the Trade,” \textit{Dry Goods}, September 1917, 65.} Some American retailers and
buyers also took considerable risks when they continued to cross the Atlantic in spite of the war. When Kirstein’s colleagues Edward and Lincoln Filene tried to scout new trade opportunities in markets outside Paris they were arrested and detained on charges of suspected spying. Lincoln told reporters that, “the proceeding had a touch of the opéra bouffé,” but he later cautioned his brother about the dangers of returning to France.114 Three buyers from Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co. in Chicago were on board the German steamship Kronprinzessin Cecilie when it received orders to proceed directly to Germany without stopping as had been planned in England and France. Fortunately for many on board the ship, four British cruisers seized the vessel and escorted its passengers safely to London.115

As transatlantic shipping looked more and more uncertain, American retailers and manufacturers began to speculate that the war might bring a much-needed boost to the country’s fledgling fashion industries. Lincoln Filene told his buyers that he couldn’t see any harm in losing access to European goods. “It would give us a big opportunity,” he mused, “America can supply its customers with the right style and all the necessary apparel it needs.”116 Even the high-end fashion magazine Vogue ran a feature article titled “American Manufacturer in the Breach: Turning to Good Account the Things We Make to Fill the Places of the Things We Can No Longer Obtain.” Vogue editors worried about

114 Edward Filene to Lincoln Filene, letter, November 11, 1914, “Correspondence with Lincoln Filene,” Box 65, LEK HBL; Also, for the identification of Frank Chitham, see: “Picked up in the Trade,” Dry Goods, September 1917, 65; “Filene Brothers Arrested in France as German Spies,” Boston Daily Globe, September 6, 1914, 2.
115 “German Vessel with $13,000, 000 in British Hands,” Chicago Daily Tribune, August 3, 1914, 3.
116 Lincoln Filene to Board of Managers, letter, July 30, 1914, “Correspondence with Lincoln Filene,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
losing access to German dyestuffs, but they praised American silks and woolen goods. New Jersey woolens, they reported, “are so exquisitely fine that they are exported and sold in Paris in competition with fine French textiles.”117 A large American manufacturer of corsets ran a nationwide competition for innovative American dress designs to complement American-made under-clothes. A representative from the company excitedly told reporters: “What a chance for all our hat manufacturers, garment manufacturers, shoe manufacturers; silk, cloth, fur, hosiery manufacturers — makers of every product in which style figures! We may not be able to reach the height of the French designers at first dash, but… designers will learn by the experience!”118 The New York Times insisted that it was finally America’s moment to develop her talents for designing clothes, and the Dry Goods Economist once again urged retailers nationwide to hold “Made in USA” weeks. At its annual meeting in December, members of the National Cloak, Suit, Skirt, and Dress Manufacturers Association agreed that, “All eyes are upon the American designer.”119

At Wanamaker’s, some buyers felt confident that they could find satisfactory replications of imported goods in the United States, but others dismissed the idea entirely,

117 “The American Manufacturer in the Breach,” Vogue, October 1, 1914, 66, 128. Anxiety about German dyestuffs reached such an extent that Herman Metz, a congressman from New York and a major importer of dyestuffs, negotiated an agreement with the German Ambassador to ensure the exports would continue. See “Metz Obtains Dyestuffs for American Manufacturers,” The Practical Druggist, September 1914, 400; “Germany Will Sell Dyes,” New York Times, August 29, 1914, 9.
118 See Printer’s Ink, October 1, 1914, 64-67.
especially in the field of women’s fashions. Two jewelry buyers excitedly reported to Wanamaker that they had secured new contracts with manufacturers in Rhode Island, who could “duplicate anything turned out from Paris so that you cannot tell the difference.” Another buyer had found a factory in Massachusetts capable of producing excellent copies of German clock movements. The head of the new low-priced menswear department also encouraged his colleagues by insisting that: “if we have to do our business with only what can be obtained in the United States, we can do it.” The director of the advertising department, however, was not so sure. Editors at *Printer’s Ink*, the journal of record in the advertising industry, had asked Joseph H. Appel of Wanamaker’s to compile a report comparing American and European merchandise in an array of lines sold at department stores across the country. In the report Appel noted that retailers were busy developing new contracts for domestic goods, but that some would find that task more challenging than others. Buyers in linens, furs, basketry, toys, and especially in women’s fashions would be hard pressed to find American manufacturers capable of meeting the standards set by Europe. “American fashions,” Appel wrote, “are not a question of patriotism; they are a question of genius.” He reminded Americans of the debt they owed to the “genius” of French designers: “For every one original French dress we buy and wear in this country we copy and reproduce at least a hundred.” France would continue to produce the world’s “most artistic” fashions, he argued, a fact that would be futile to deny. And, war or not, Americans would continue to demand them.120

Appel’s devotion to France is not surprising given Wanamaker’s long history with the Paris trade, and the fact that he had just orchestrated an advertising campaign for Paris gowns that attracted admiration across the country, and even across the Atlantic. *Printer’s Ink* judged Wanamaker’s “Paris Gowns” promotions as “probably the best that any advertiser has ever published.”\(^1\) When Walls returned with such exciting stories of her wartime tour of Paris couturiers, Appel saw the advertising possibilities immediately. “We knew the public was hungry for anything with a war flavor,” he told *Printer’s Ink*, “and that the papers were full of speculations as to the absence of Paris fashions.”\(^2\)

Although some American buyers who stayed in Paris after the mobilization described the city as “calm and hopeful, full of courage and patience,” Walls and Appel crafted a much more dramatic portrayal of her adventures in Paris.\(^3\) Adding to the story, of course, was the fact that Walls’ gown samples were some of the only *haute couture* to reach the United States between August 1914 and the spring of 1915. To generate enthusiasm for a scheduled exhibition of Walls’ nearly two hundred gown samples, Appel circulated a series of advertisements recounting the harrowing adventures of an unnamed female buyer on a patriotic quest to bring Americans the latest fashions from the French war front. Written as a dramatic first-person narrative, the advertisements detailed how the buyer encountered scenes of weeping women and dressmakers donning soldier’s uniforms. Hotels and banks closed around her and war threatened to envelop the city.

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\(^1\) “Wanamaker’s Great War Ad,” *Printer’s Ink*, September 3, 1914, 55-58.
\(^2\) Ibid., 55.
while she bravely trekked from one atelier to another. But the real adventure began after the buyer secured her gown samples. According to the copy, she only narrowly escaped from Paris after being denied passage on a train and enduring frightening interrogations at seventeen military checkpoints on her way to Le Havre. In the most dramatic moment of the narrative, the buyer and her kindly French chauffeur found themselves surrounded by angry French soldiers with bayonets fixed upon them.  

Wanamaker’s “Paris Gowns” stories and corresponding fashion exhibition quickly became a sensation. Reporters as far away as London took note of the campaign and countless newspapers and magazines reprinted the ad copy long after the “Paris Gowns” exhibitions ended. Wanamaker’s auditorium inside the New York flagship building was outfitted to seat 1,700 people and it was “packed solid” for multiple showings of the exhibition, which featured evidence of the story’s authenticity, such as the French osier baskets in which Walls had packed the gown samples. News outlets reported that hundreds of people were turned away from each of the wildly popular events. Inside the exhibition writers for *Printer’s Ink* noted that, “As one mixed with the crowd expressions of amazement were common, not only for the gowns, but over the feat of the buyer.” Although the advertisements did not release Mary Walls’ name, she quickly became a well-known figure in the retail and fashion industries, especially after

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Wanamaker himself awarded her with a diamond pin for her “pluck” and service to the
firm. In the American Cloak & Suit Review Walls was celebrated in the same terms as a
war hero: “Here comes a woman back through the lines of war bringing victory in her
own field as great as any achieved by the warring armies of Europe.”¹²⁶ Walls’ story
drew such widespread attention that novelist and playwright Earl Derr Biggers developed
a play based on Walls’ adventures. Biggers’ Inside the Lines received positive reviews as
a “war thriller” and ran for months at Broadway’s Longacre Theater. Carrol McComas,
the lead actress in the play, even wore on stage some of the samples Walls brought from
Paris. Years after the armistice, trade journals continued to refer to Mary Walls as a
“heroine of the great war.”¹²⁷ At a time when most Americans learned about the European
War through grainy sketches and newsprint, Walls and her stories offered more authentic
access to the French front. In 1914 Paris fashions came to symbolize more than artistry or
“genius,” rather, they took on the hue of war relics and allowed Americans to imagine
themselves “inside the lines,” alongside their sister republic.

When many couturiers returned from the front at the start of 1915, Walls and
Appel joined together again for another sensational, if a bit more somber, exhibition of
Paris fashions. In the interest of the national economy, the French government pulled

¹²６“The Grand Commander of the Old Guard, John Wanamaker, Salutes Miss Mary J. Walls,” American
¹²７“Wanamaker’s Great War Ad,” Printer’s Ink, September 3, 1914, 55-58; “The Grand Commander of
the Old Guard, John Wanamaker, Salutes Miss Mary J. Walls,” American Cloak and Suit Review,
September, 1914, 153-154; “Gowns Imported by Miss Mary Walls to be Worn by Miss Carol McComas in
‘Inside the Lines,’ Now Playing at the LongAcre Theatre,” American Cloak and Suit Review, April, 1915,
221; “A War Thriller at the LongAcre,” New York Tribune, February 13, 1915, 9; Earl Derr Biggers and
Robert Welles Ritchie, Inside the Lines (Indianapolis: The Bobs Merrill Company, 1915); Ada Patterson,
couturiers back from the front and urged them to begin designing again; too many French women formerly employed in the dressmaking trades had been pushed out of work. As a number of leading couturiers returned to their ateliers to design new gowns for the upcoming Panama Pacific Exposition held in the newly rebuilt city of San Francisco, Walls, too, made her way back to Paris. She secured exclusive rights to display the samples at Wanamaker’s stores after the Panama Pacific Exposition. Once again Appel imbued the April 1915 exhibition with the “war flavor” that Americans craved. In his hands, the exhibition was not merely a display of gowns, but rather a “supreme message” to the world from Paris “during her day of trial.” Appel’s promotions took on the imagined voice of the beleaguered city. “They may take from us many things,” Paris announced, “but they cannot wrest from us the scepter of fashion.” Thousands of Americans flooded Wanamaker’s flagship stores for multiple exhibitions featuring gowns designed by the famous and selfless “soldier-dressmakers” of France. The New York Tribune reported that, “there was in the minds of all who watched the procession, a great admiration for the determination of France… and the importance of the fashion scepter to Paris.” As historians have shown, the French did regard the export of haute couture as an important part of the war effort, and as a symbol of the enduring French national spirit.

129 It’s unclear when the Paris House reopened. However, buyers refer to the House in their meetings in April 1917. See Buyer’s Meeting, April 23, 1917, WC HSP.
By placing Parish fashions in the context of French nationalism and the war, Walls and Appel orchestrated an event that the French would likely have appreciated, and which satiated Americans’ desire for some tangible connection to the war.132

Only a few weeks after the exhibition, however, Americans experienced their first real brush with the war when a German submarine torpedoed the Lusitania off the coast of Ireland, sending nearly twelve hundred civilians to their deaths, including over one hundred Americans. In the aftermath of the Lusitania tragedy, sensationalized war-tinged exhibitions of Paris fashions no longer captured American attitudes towards the war—especially not at Wanamaker’s, which had suffered the loss of Frank and Alice Tesson. Still reeling from the tragedy, Wanamaker poured his energies into fostering a resurgence of interest in American designs and manufactures, recast in boldly patriotic terms. Just days after the Lusitania, the most important trade journal in the industry, Women’s Wear Daily, featured a cover story on Wanamaker’s own house designer, Madame V. Kosow, who was behind a new series of patriotic fashions. Kosow was an immigrant from Russia but she developed Wanamaker’s new signature patriotic item: original Independence Blue silks.133 As advertisements explained, “Independence Blue” was a “new American color, created from the three colors used in Old Glory—the red in the stripes, the blue in the field of stars, and the white in the stars and stripes.” Promotions featured sketches of the Liberty Bell and described the color as “radiating with joy and independence.”134

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Under Kosow’s direction, a new team of designers developed a line of merchandise around the theme of American independence. For example, Wanamaker’s advertised an “Independence hat, a smart hat for the men of independence in taste.” Independence Blue silk lined the hat’s interior.\(^{135}\) The new patriotic color was such a success that Wanamaker’s designers developed an entire “color card” of forty original hues inspired by national symbols, such as: Revere red, Lincoln violet, Columbus green, West Point gray, Lafayette rose, Hiawatha scarlet, and San Juan raspberry.\(^{136}\)

Across the country, retailers and manufacturers followed Wanamaker’s lead and embraced patriotic American designs and manufactures. At the start of 1916 \textit{Women’s Wear Daily} pronounced the year a “fresh psychological moment for the promotion of American ideas and American made goods,” and ran regular feature stories on retailers sympathetic to the cause.\(^{137}\) The \textit{New York Times} reported that a growing number of American dressmakers had started incorporating the colors of the United States flag into their designs. In particular, dressmakers had begun to sew small, impressionistic flags done in loose stitches as a way of expressing their support for the U.S. National Guard after they were deployed to the Mexican border. At fashionable resorts young American women were wearing “sport suits made up of red Jersey skirts, blue coats, white shoes, and white hats with bands of red, white, and blue around the high crown.”\(^{138}\)

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\textsuperscript{135} “The Hat Department,” \textit{The Clothier and Furnisher}, April 1915, 106.
\textsuperscript{136} “American Colors Stimulate Sales,” \textit{The American Silk Journal}, April 1914, 47.
two years earlier when the war first threatened supply lines across the Atlantic, boasted a
spike in membership. By 1916 the League attracted more than 100,000 members
representing every state in the country. The League made headlines when it called for a
“Made in America Christmas” and urged shoppers to “free themselves from the tyranny
of the word ‘imported’” while shopping for Christmas gifts.  

Wanamaker, too, sent another team of designers to the American Museum of Natural History in New York to
work with anthropologists on the development of another new American fashion line. Although the new collection was actually inspired by the museum’s South American
collections and featured “Indian ponchos,” fashion critics praised it as a “new departure
in the art of American costume designs.”

Despite the broad appeal of patriotic fashions, they were not neutral, or at least
Wanamaker had not intended them to be. In fact, they represented an important shift in
the retailer’s attitudes away from the commitment to American neutrality in the First
World War. In 1914 Wanamaker had stood firmly behind President Wilson’s policy of
neutrality and urged other Americans to focus on humanitarian relief instead through
first-person editorials printed in the store’s advertisements. He ordered staff at both of his
flagships to set up booths to collect donations of money and supplies for the American
Red Cross. In addition, Wanamaker personally raised nearly two hundred thousand

139 “Made in USA Show,” Dry Goods Economist, March 4, 1916, 3; “Proposes Made in America
Christmas,” Women’s Wear Daily, November 13, 1916, 21; “Practical Examples of Original American
Design on Blouses at Wanamaker’s,” Women’s Wear Daily, July 19, 1916, 1; “Wanamaker’s Showing First

140 “Story of a Department Store Buyer Who Visited a Museum,” Women’s Wear Daily, May 22, 1915, 1, 8.

141 Wanamaker’s neutrality advertisements quoted George Washington’s farewell address and the Red
Cross Station advertisements called for “neutrality in war, humanity in suffering.” See Gibbons, John
dollars in donations to aid Belgium. He chartered two vessels to transport to the devastated country thousands of tons of food, clothing, and other supplies purchased with the donations. However, after the sinking of the Lusitania, Wanamaker questioned the wisdom of neutrality and lost faith in peace movements. Despite his years of devotion to former President William Howard Taft, even through the disappointments of the Payne Aldrich bill, Wanamaker demurred when Taft invited him to serve on the executive committee of the newly established League to Enforce Peace. And although he entertained several “peace talks” with Henry Ford, whom he had had admired since they met in 1904, Wanamaker refused to endorse the auto magnate’s plan to send a peace mission to Europe. His refusal was not only because Ford’s plan was ill-conceived, but also because Wanamaker did not believe peace was a viable path forward. “Peace talk is mostly fol-de-rol at the present moment,” he wrote in his diary, “business statesmanship as well as patriotism is the hourly call just now.”

Just what Wanamaker meant by “business statesmanship” became clear when he accepted the chairmanship of the newly formed Philadelphia branch of the conservative,


142 By the time the second ship set sail Wanamaker wrote in his diary, “I am so good-for-nothing… I think I put any strength or brains I had into it… my legs and head are still unrested.” See Appel, *Business Biography*, 238; Gibbons, *John Wanamaker*, vol. 2, 373; *Perrysburg Journal*, December 3, 1914, 6; image, *American Red Cross Magazine*, Vol. 10 No. 1, January 1915, 15.


even hawkish National Security League (NSL) in July 1915. In his acceptance speech, Wanamaker suggested that the federal government ought to: “Borrow from every available source $100 billion dollars with which to purchase Belgium from Germany, restore its government and sovereignty, and then when suitable return it to its people.”

The room filled with gasps at Wanamaker’s proposal for “business statesmanship.” Letters of protest poured into his office, and Wanamaker was skewered in the national press. Philadelphia’s mayor told newspapers that the proposal should be treated with as much seriousness as “midsummer dreams” and “childhood fables.” An editorial in The Washington Post chided Wanamaker for pushing sympathy to the point of absurdity, and Life joked that if the war kept up even France could be “bought for a song.” One week after his shocking speech, Wanamaker stepped down from the chairmanship of the Philadelphia NSL branch and retreated to Saratoga Springs, New York to rest. Appel, who had witnessed the fallout from the speech later reflected that Wanamaker had spoken “with a heart overwhelmed by the tragedy of the war, especially by the plight of Belgium.” He was also still reeling from the loss of the Tessons on board the Lusitania. Whatever the reason for Wanamaker’s ill-conceived proposal to “buy Belgium,” the backlash pushed him further and further from talk of peace and neutrality.

Although he stepped down from his official post as Chairman of the NSL, Wanamaker remained deeply involved and brought his business in line with many of the League’s initiatives. Backed by the country’s leading banking and commercial executives, the NSL was the “best heeled and most formidable” of a growing number of groups advocating for national preparedness. Closely tied with conservative political interests, the NSL pushed for measures to militarize the country by establishing a bigger army, an expanded navy, and, most importantly, by advocating a system of universal military training. As captured in the organization’s bylaws, NSL members described their purpose in almost spiritual terms: “to promote patriotic education and national sentiment and service among the people of the United States.” Preparedness was, after all, the political movement that spawned one of the country’s most enduring symbols of patriotism: James Montgomery Flagg’s Uncle Sam. Long before Uncle Sam appeared above the caption, “I Want You,” he appeared alongside the question: “What Are You Doing For Preparedness?” In fact, Wanamaker had spent twenty-five years immersing his adolescent employees in preparedness training. Through the John Wanamaker Commercial Institute (JWCI), founded in 1890, all staff under the age of eighteen was required to undergo military training according to the regulations of the U.S. Army, as well as take classes in subjects like grammar or commerce, public-speaking or music. Wanamaker arranged his JWCI “cadets” in regiments and even organized a military band and drum and bugle corps. Beginning in 1916 Wanamaker extended the spirit of the

148 Kennedy, *Over Here*, 30-31; Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, 4-5.
149 The JWCI included white employees only. The Robert C. Ogden Association was organized to provide academic and musical education for black employees, but no physical training or military drilling was
JWCI to the rest of his twelve thousand employees, including both men and women. Together they formed the Red, White, and Blue Cross, Inc. As the official charter explained, the group was “associated for the purposes of education and preparation for, and cooperative service in, public emergency.” Promotional materials celebrated the “patriotic impulse” of the Red, White, and Blue Cross and explained how its programs streamlined Wanamaker’s employees into one effective “agent of service.” Under the auspices of the new organization, adult male employees enrolled in military drilling and physical training, and all were invited to undergo courses to learn the skills necessary to respond to national disasters, along the same lines as the American Red Cross. It was precisely the combination of patriotic education, military training, and national service for which the NSL advocated.

The principles of “preparedness” had underpinned the development of patriotic fashions, too. Unlike fashion nationalism, however, patriotic fashions did not aim to disrupt the Paris fashion trade. In fact, patriotic and Paris fashions became increasingly intertwined as the United States moved closer towards entering the First World War. Fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* continued to report diligently on the latest styles emerging from the ateliers of Paquin, Poiret, and Callot, and some popular organs even pushed back against the trend towards American-made merchandise. For example, in the midst of the widely promoted “Made in America” Christmas season in

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offered. See *The Store Army: 12,000 Workers, Their Growth, Recreation, Self-Development, and Patriotic Services* (Philadelphia and New York: John Wanamaker, 1918), 27. Robert C. Ogden was a longtime executive at Wanamaker’s in New York and an active member of the Board of Trustees of the Hampton Institute. See *A Life Well Lived: In Memory of Robert Curtis Ogden* (Hampton: Hampton Institute Press, 1914), WC HSP.  

150 *The Store Army*, 30-32.
1916, *Life* magazine called on Americans to purchase imports for the sake of Europe. “General concern for human welfare,” editors at *Life* argued “should prompt us to buy from harried Europe anything she can produce that we have need of.” Significantly, the popular trade journal *American Cloak and Suit Review* argued that Americans ought to continue buying Paris fashions because of their “uniquely American” qualities. The “universality” of Paris styles in American life, editors argued, “relieved newer citizens of all distinguishing marks” and “obliterated class distinctions… whether one visits a mining camp in Colorado or a Spanish mission town in California, there is found the influence of French fashions.” By wearing clothing that followed Paris designs, new citizens mingled with older citizens, learned the language, and began to understand national ideals. Paris fashions could be seen as “leveling” American society in part because they, too, emerged from a democratic society. More and more, retailers, too, emphasized the historic friendship and shared history between the two countries. On the cover of the program for Wanamaker’s October 1916 *Exposition Parisienne* Americans found a powerful visual testament to the strength of Franco-American relations. In the image, two contemporary female figures representing France and the United States reach out towards each other from opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Both figures wave white handkerchiefs as signs of peace and friendship. An eighteenth century frigate flying a French flag, a symbol of the crucial role France played in the American Revolution, is bound for the United States and just nearly brings the two figures together. Framed by

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152 “All America Adopts Paris Fashions,” *American Cloak and Suit Review*, April 1916, 144.
laurel wreaths that symbolize both victory and honor, and by the intertwined flags of the
two nations, Wanamaker’s *Exposition Parisienne* almost made a case for the United
States to fight alongside its historic ally.\(^{153}\) When the United States did finally enter the
war six months later, however, the focus of the retail trade would shift again, away from
fashion and towards a new level of national service.

*Liberty Loans and Fair Prices in Wartime Department Stores*

On the morning of April 16, 1917, Wanamaker called a meeting of buyers and
managers in the Philadelphia flagship store to make clear his support for the President’s
decision to enter the First World War. Six months earlier, he had campaigned vigorously
against Wilson’s reelection, loudly denouncing the president for allowing Germany to
invade Belgium with little consequence and for inaction in the wake of the *Lusitania*
sinking.\(^{154}\) But none of that mattered now. Wanamaker told his buyers that he believed
Wilson’s proclamation would “stand alongside the best things that George Washington
ever did, as well as those of Abraham Lincoln.” He presented a draft of a resolution that
he planned to send to the White House and circulate among all his employees. “You have
made Democrats of us all,” the resolution proclaimed, “…we place not only our business
institutions, but ourselves as a unit for any and every service which will aid you to carry
out your plans at this momentous hour.” Wanamaker’s buyers and managers unanimously

\(^{153}\) *Exposition Parisienne*, October 2-6 1916, WC HSP.

\(^{154}\) Wanamaker placed a series of patriotic advertisements in favor of Wilson’s opponent Charles Evans
Hughes, donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Hughes campaign, and even orchestrated a highly
publicized reconciliatory campaign featuring Hughes and Theodore Roosevelt in advance of the election.
approved the resolution and voted to print copies of it on thousands of cards that employees could carry daily in their pockets. They also agreed to procure two thousand American flags, enough to fill every window in the building, and stock counters throughout the store with an array of affordable patriotic merchandise, everything from red, white and blue handkerchiefs, lampshades, and parasols to submarine inkwells and military charms. That evening, Wanamaker’s stores closed early so that the firm’s twelve thousand employees in Philadelphia and New York could gather to hear a reading of the president’s proclamation announcing the nation’s entry into the First World War.

Transatlantic trade had thrust American department stores into the throes of what many called “Europe’s War,” long before the United States officially joined the Allied Forces. However, the country’s entry into the war in April 1917 radically altered the role that department stores played in American life. Across the country, the war marked an “unprecedented mobilization of social institutions, human labor, and popular will.” Calls to serve one’s duty, sacrifice, and fulfill obligations to the federal state infiltrated every corner of American’s lives, in their homes, schools, clubs, and workplaces. For America’s retailers, wartime mobilization programs posed both a tremendous opportunity to demonstrate their unique capabilities to serve the nation and a great threat their sales revenues. No federal program better illustrates this quandary than the nationwide drive to

155 Buyer’s Meetings, April 16 & 18, 1917, WC HSP.
157 Capozzola, Uncle Sam Wants You, 8.
sell Liberty Loans. Even before Congress passed the Liberty Loan Act, retailers reached out to Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo offering to sell bonds over the counter in their stores. For the duration of the war, department stores across the country played a key role in marketing the loan program to women and average American wage-earners, most of whom had little familiarity with banks or loans prior to the war. At the same time, widespread calls for Americans to curtail their spending, a core principle of Liberty Loan drives, threatened profits and bloated merchandise stocks. By adopting the popular and government-sanctioned language of “fair prices,” many retailers shrewdly undermined the “national need for thrift” by reframing spending as patriotic and linking shopping to the sale of Liberty Loans. The demands of wartime mobilization in a country that was largely ill-prepared for it signaled the end of retailers’ emphasis on inspired pitches for patriotic or Paris fashions. Instead, retailers positioned their stores as one of many new local agents of the federal government, even as they served their own bottom lines.

Weeks before Congress approved the First Liberty Loan Act, Elbridge Howe, Treasurer of the newly formed National Retail Dry Goods Association (NRDGA), recognized the potential for retailers to sell bonds. The purpose of the Liberty Loan program was to sell bonds to the non-banking public. Or, as one historian has explained, “to find investors who would divert their resources from other uses and put them in the

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158 The NRDGA was founded in 1911 and acquired 273 member firms by 1912. The organization was formed in part for the sharing and development of standardized data on retailing. Larger firms like Wanamaker’s, Macy’s, and even Filene’s never joined. They were, however, in constant conversation with the leadership of the NRDGA, and Percy Straus of Macy’s even spoke at an NRDGA banquet. See Vicki Howard, From Main Street to Mall: The Rise and Fall of the American Department Store (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 38-40.
service of the war effort.” In order to reach these potential investors, Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo recruited an army of volunteers at the local and national levels to solicit (and sometimes coerce) subscriptions.\(^{159}\) As soon as Howe heard about the program, he wired McAdoo to offer the services of department stores all over the country, explaining that retailers “would be glad to treat [bonds] as merchandise and sell them over the counter.” The *New York Times* seconded Howe’s enthusiasm and argued that department stores had the ability to reach the “largest number of persons of any private agency that has taken up the boosting of the loan as a patriotic duty.” Large stores across New York City joined forces with smaller retailers to form the New York Retail Merchant’s Liberty Loan Committee. Louis Stewart, Chairman of that committee and President of McCreery & Co. department store, donated space in his flagship building to establish a headquarters where a team of clerks developed strategies for selling bonds. Stewart told the press that, “A department store is the natural place to sell Liberty bonds to the women of this country because it is the one establishment in which every woman feels at home.”\(^{160}\) Retailers in Chicago and Boston followed the example set by New York retailers and collaborated along similar lines.\(^{161}\)

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\(^{159}\) Kennedy, *Over Here*, 100-105. Capozzola also writes extensively about “coercive volunteerism” in the context of women’s volunteer associations and men’s vigilante societies during the First World War. See Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, 84-143.


Beginning in May 1917 department stores across the country devoted whatever resources they could to raising Liberty Loan subscriptions. Like many large corporations in other industries, retailers leaned on their employees to take out subscriptions and donated thousands upon thousands of advertisements to their local liberty loan committees. During each of the four major bond drives department stores hosted actors, comedians, authors, singers, and dignitaries to draw crowds into their stores hoping to sell loan subscriptions. When Marshall Field’s in Chicago recruited Mary Pickford to promote bonds the crowds were so dense that it was almost impossible for volunteers to sell bonds efficiently. Some of the most effective promotions, however, were the window displays that overwhelmed cityscapes, especially in Manhattan. As the New York Times reported, a person could not walk down Broadway or Fifth Avenue “without having his eyes assailed from every side with calls to buy bonds and with powerful and dramatic arguments for buying them.” While some of these were educational, such as Best & Co.’s elaborate display of a miniature world at war or Bonwit Teller’s exhibition of a German “one man tank” captured by the French in the battle of the Somme; others were hawkish and entertaining, such as Gimbels’ life-size papier-

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162 In May 1917 companies across the country sent letters to President Wilson detailing their plans for ensuring their thousands of employees subscribed to the Liberty Loans. See Liberty Loan Files, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Library of Congress. John Wanamaker urged his department heads to take out larger subscriptions in private meetings, and over the two-year period his employees subscribed for nearly two million dollars in loans. See Buyers Meeting, October 16, 1917, WC HSP; The Store Army, 37. At Macy’s in New York the employee magazine Sparks ran cover stories, special features, and prize contests to stimulate sales of Liberty Loans and War Savings Stamps among employees: “Make the Next Liberty Loan a Tidal Wave to Engulf the Hun,” Sparks, September, 1918. See also Early Macy’s Collection, Straus Historical Society.

mâché statue of the Kaiser on his knees in front of an American soldier. 164 Marshall Field’s produced what were arguably the most emotionally stirring displays during the fourth Liberty Loan drive. Five full window size tableaus depicted standard bearers from the armies of Great Britain, Belgium, Italy, France, and the United States heroically clutching their nation’s flag in the midst of battle. The firm sent the tableaus from Chicago to New York where the Fuel Administration gave special permission to illuminate the displays so that workers could see them at night, and the Liberty Loan Committee asked that they remain in place long after the loan drive ended. 165

Department stores raised mostly small denomination subscriptions, but they nonetheless became an essential part of the national Liberty Loan program because they had access to vast segments of the “non-banking public,” mainly women. Banks and hotels routinely raised larger subscriptions by dollar amounts from their ranks of wealthy clientele than most retailers. Whereas New York’s Liberty National Bank could subscribe over $10 million from a single client, Marshall Field’s high profile event featuring Mary Pickford brought in just $1.5 million. 166 Yet, by the second loan drive the Treasury Department recognized the important contributions of department stores by listing them alongside banks and post offices as sites to purchase subscriptions in their official brochures. The National Women’s Liberty Loan Committee treated department stores as

166 “$1,000,000,000 Set as New York’s Aim in Loan Campaign,” The Evening World, June 11, 1917, 6; “Fairbanks Smiles, U.S. Gets $80,000,” The Sun, October 20, 1917, 2; “Mary Sells Her Little Bonds for a Million,” Chicago Daily Tribune, April 21, 1918, 5.
an extension of the public square by instructing groups to hold meetings in “department stores, on street corners, everywhere that the public may be reached.” In New England, local committees reported that their three most successful strategies for bond sales were door-to-door canvassing, street meetings, and sales booths in department stores.\(^{167}\) Even in smaller cities not known as bustling commercial centers, local newspapers directed the public to “go to the nearest department store” to subscribe to a liberty loan.\(^{168}\) Department stores proved so essential in raising small denomination subscriptions during the first loan drives that when the War Savings Committee was established in 1918 to promote low-cost war savings stamps, the chairmen organized a national retail division led by Howe, Secretary of the NRDGA.\(^{169}\)

The Liberty Loan program was not the only national mobilization effort to rely on department stores as gateways to the pocketbooks and loyalties of average Americans. When Liberty Loan drives ended, many retailers and sales clerks simply redirected their energies towards an array of war-related charities from Belgian relief funds to support for the Fatherless Children of France, and especially to raising contributions and making supplies for the American Red Cross. In addition to staging rallies, running advertisements, and setting up donation booths, window displays for the American Red

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Cross were just as creative as those designed to solicit loan subscriptions. In New York, Bloomingdale’s filled one window with a replica of an operating room, complete with a wounded soldier, doctor, nurse, and the flags of the United States and the American Red Cross. Lord & Taylor attracted considerable attention with its elaborate scene of a soldier’s trench dugout, which was constructed six feet below the window level, and featured a soldier surrounded by bits of exploded shells waiting on a Red Cross truck pictured off in the distance. Wanamaker’s began raising funds for the Red Cross in 1914 with the establishment of “Wanamaker’s Red Cross Central Station,” but after the United States entered the war, legions of female employees were called on to provide additional support. Under the auspices of the employee preparedness organization, the Red, White, and Blue Cross, Inc., Wanamaker established an official Red Cross auxiliary unit. On a weekly and sometimes daily basis, members of the auxiliary gathered in the store’s workrooms to make by hand tens of thousands of surgical dressings and other hospital supplies. Wanamaker also gave over the entire eighth floor of the Philadelphia flagship building to the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Red Cross to manage a “volunteer factory” that was open to the public everyday. Volunteers working in Wanamaker’s Red Cross Hall made over five hundred thousand articles of surgical dressing, medical garments, and knit goods, such as sweaters and socks, to send

172 The Store Army, 30-32. On the symbolic importance of knitting women during the war, see: Capozzola, Uncle Sam Wants You, 83-86.
173 Like most department stores, Wanamaker’s central location made it an ideal place to host a headquarters. “City Gives Million in Red Cross Day,” Evening Public Ledger, June 179, 1917, 5; photograph, Red Cross Meeting, City Hall Plaza, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, WC HSP.
to Europe.\textsuperscript{174} Although Wanamaker hoped his generosity to the Red Cross would serve as an “electric flash to every American office and factory” to follow his example, executives across the country found much more inspiration in his winning sales strategies than in his generosity.\textsuperscript{175}

Retailers’ headline-grabbing contributions to Liberty Loan drives and the American Red Cross belied the pressures that buyers faced to keep up their sales in spite of the rising cost of living and widespread calls for thrift. For average wage-earning Americans the cost of living rose sixty-five percent over the course of the war. During the first three months alone, the price of clothing skyrocketed by thirty percent. By the time the war ended clothing costs had further increased by an eye-popping ninety-three percent. President Wilson repeatedly called on businessmen to adhere to “fair and market prices,” but he also exhorted American consumers to change their spending habits.\textsuperscript{176} In his proclamation announcing America’s entry into the war, Wilson appealed directly to “housewives,” whom he implored to practice “strict economy” with forceful reproach: “This is the time for America to correct her unpardonable fault of wastefulness and extravagance.”\textsuperscript{177} Strict economy quickly became a cornerstone of the national program to sell liberty loans. When Secretary of the Treasury McAdoo toured the country to promote Liberty Loans in the spring and summer of 1917, he called for the prevention of “waste and extravagance,” and suggested that Americans give up all luxuries for the

\textsuperscript{174} “Closing Exercise of the Urquhart Auxiliary No. 3 of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Red Cross,” January 15, 1919, WC HSP.
\textsuperscript{175} “Red Cross Rally in Egyptian Hall,” June 25, 1917, WC HSP.
\textsuperscript{176} Jacobs, \textit{Pocketbook Politics}, 53-56.
\textsuperscript{177} “Proclamation by the President to the People,” \textit{New York Times}, April 16, 1917, 1.
duration of the war. McAdoo claimed that, “The amount saved in a year by the practice of intelligent economy—not foolish or unnecessary denial—would be sufficient to pay the cost of the war for a year.” Local Liberty Loan committees and speakers repeated the same refrain. A handbook for volunteer Liberty Loan speakers published by the U.S. Treasury included five pages describing strategies for discussing the “national need for thrift.” As the handbook advised: “Everyone who wishes to encourage the sale of government securities will be interested in having people curtail in buying other things.” When McAdoo spoke to businessmen, he struck a more conciliatory tone. In Chicago he told a room full of bankers and other corporate executives that Liberty Loans would not cause a “business disturbance” because the government planned to keep the money raised circulating within the country. It was cold comfort for executives facing declines in revenues.

Retailers did their best to counter calls for strict economy without seeming self-interested. The president of the NRDGA told the New York Times that it was “most unfortunate” that so “much has been uttered on the subject of economy. It would be better during the continuance of the war to be extravagant than unwisely economical.” Wanamaker, too, circulated a widely admired editorial advertisement titled, “Keep Business Going for Our Country’s Sake,” and subsequently received requests from retailers across the country to reprint his words in their own local newspapers.

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Wanamaker insisted that in a truly “patriotic economy,” the standard of living must be kept up: “Homes must be kept up. Merchandise must be produced, distributed, and used. The more money we spend the more we will have in our pockets to spend.”

Editors at *Women’s Wear Daily* praised the advertisement as “strong blow” against the “ill-advised” calls for economy. Leading executives at the NRDGA also collaborated with the National Economy Board of the National Council of Defense to implement a number of cost-saving measures in the name of what they called “patriotic conservation.” In July 1917 retailers across the country agreed to pass some of the first limits on merchandise returns. By eliminating the “return goods evil”—that is, the frequent return of damaged or dated goods many months after the initial purchase—the committee claimed retailers could save five to ten percent of the cost of doing business. Retailers also greatly curtailed the number of package deliveries made to customers’ homes each day, and eliminated special custom deliveries altogether. The NRDGA implemented a nationwide advertising campaign to convince shoppers who had grown accustomed to these services, that carrying their own packages was a patriotic act. “You serve the government while serving yourself when you shop in this manner,” one Macy’s advertisement instructed. Two months before the war ended, the *New York Times* declared that no “institution” had been “affected by the various wartime changes in industry, transportation, and labor so much as the department store.”

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Despite the claims of savings attributed to such patriotic conservation measures, Wanamaker’s buyers saw their sales decline steadily through 1917. During the first month of the war, storewide sales at the Philadelphia flagship plummeted seven percent behind the previous year. Wanamaker increased the advertising budget and demanded that each department head inform him personally of their sales progress every two days.\(^{183}\) By the fall season, sales were running slightly ahead of the previous year, but still several percentage points behind the expected annual increase. For department stores, lagging sales not only affected overall revenues, they also disrupted buying operations by preventing the turnover of stocks and decreasing returns on future sales. Macy’s, for example, turned over the entire inventory in the store four and one half times per year between 1914 and 1918. While figures for Wanamaker’s yearly turnovers are not available, the minutes of buyers’ meetings reveal that in the fall of 1917 the store carried higher stocks than at any previous point in more than fifty years of business: a nerve-wracking twenty million dollars worth of merchandise.\(^{184}\) Wanamaker’s buyers labored over the size of new merchandise orders, always fearful that large stocks would bring low returns and small stocks would fail to meet demands.\(^{185}\) Department heads regularly complained that no one was spending money and, in exasperation, Wanamaker blamed

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183 *Buyer’s Meeting*, May 17, 1917, WC HSP.

184 Between 1914 and 1918 Macy’s turned its stock around an average of 4.5 times per year. There is no comparable data for Wanamaker’s, but, in general, high stocks signaled slow sales and low returns on investment. See Ralph Hower, *History of Macy’s of New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), 396; *Buyer’s Meeting*, October 15, 1917, WC HSP; *Buyer’s Meetings*, October 16, 1917, WC HSP.

185 *Buyer’s Meetings*, 1914, WC HSP.
the success of the Liberty Loan drives.\textsuperscript{186} “Rich people are buying bonds,” he lamented to his managers, “papering their houses with them, and not spending their money for anything.”\textsuperscript{187} Moreover, the repeated calls for thrift had likely curtailed the kind of spending that large-scale retailers depended on to reach their high sales volumes and turnover stocks. As Wanamaker had once told his sales clerks: “If a man comes into the store to buy a watch, we do not want to simply sell him the watch and let him go home.”\textsuperscript{188}

Wanamaker was the first and the most successful retailer to use Liberty Loan drives as opportunities to drive up sales and turnover stocks. A few weeks ahead of the Second Liberty Loan drive in October 1917, Wanamaker called a meeting of what he called a “war council,” comprised of his most experienced managers and buyers.\textsuperscript{189} Together they planned a campaign for a banner sale of one million dollars worth of select merchandise below market value to occur simultaneously with the Liberty Loan drive. Wanamaker told the war council that the purpose of the sale was two-fold: “to make a favorable impression on the public, and at the same time make an increase in sales.” To guard against any accusations that the sale was self-interested, members of the war council swiftly incorporated the increasingly popular language of “fair prices.” President Wilson had relied heavily on the phrase in establishing the Federal Food Administration

\textsuperscript{186} Recurring theme in buyers’ meetings May 1917 – October 1918, WC HSP.
\textsuperscript{187} Buyer’s Meeting, December 29, 1917, WC HSP.
\textsuperscript{188} Buyer’s Meeting, October 26, 1914, WC HSP. Meg Jacobs also discusses department stores’ dependence on impulse buying. See: Jacobs, Pocketbook Politics, 19-20.
during the summer of 1917, which aimed to address growing demands for more affordable food. The Federal Food Administration mobilized thousands of women volunteers across the country, encouraging them to demand “fair prices” from local business owners.\textsuperscript{190} Wanamaker’s war council placed the firm in allegiance with consumers in the fight for fair prices. Promotions for the “One Million Dollar Sale” insisted that Wanamaker’s was “a servant of the people, supplying them with what they need of good grades at fair prices.” And as another advertisement claimed, the store’s alliance with the American people preceded any demands from the government: “Without waiting for the government to ask us... we have decided to do our duty as merchants to take part in the [fair price] policy of the government.”\textsuperscript{191} Wanamaker’s “One Million Dollar Sale” was an immediate hit. \textit{Women’s Wear Daily} reported that crowds at Wanamaker’s stores were as thick as at Christmastime, and the war council even decided to extend the sale for five additional weeks beyond the duration of the Second Liberty Loan Drive. In the end, Wanamaker’s sold over five million dollars of merchandise at “fair prices,” below market value. During the final days of the sale, advertisements prodded other businesses to follow their lead: “It only seems fair that all producers, and distributors of goods should take less profits until the war settles.”\textsuperscript{192}

Following the success of the “One Million Dollar Sale,” Wanamaker’s continued to rely on the language of “fair prices” to counter increased pressures on Americans to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[190] Jacobs, \textit{Pocketbook Politics}, 58.
\item[192] “Fifth Week of Sales at John Wanamaker’s, \textit{Women’s Wear Daily}, November 19, 1917, 19, 24. All information about the formation and discussions of Wanamaker’s war council are taken from four \textit{Buyers Meetings} on October 15 – 16, 1917, WC HSP.
\end{footnotes}
save their money. During the 1917 Christmas season, the Society for the Prevention of Useless Gifts (SPUGS), a reform group founded in 1912 to oppose American materialism, resurfaced to add to the chorus of calls urging thrift. SPUGS targeted American women and argued that only small trifles should be bought during the Christmas season. The rest, they argued, ought to be donated for the support of American soldiers. Wanamaker’s upended calls for thrift by urging a different kind of sacrifice during the Christmas season. “We must not limit the expression of our goodwill to the convenience of our pockets,” Wanamaker wrote in an editorial advertisement, “we must be willing—and glad—to suffer a little financially.” The stores also adopted a new policy of no discounts for special groups, which advertisers claimed enabled them to continue offering fair prices. According to Wanamaker, it was the “right psychological moment” for discontinuing discounts to favored classes of consumers, even to members of the U.S. military. “Every man’s dollar ought to go as far as any other man’s dollar,” he proclaimed. The *Dry Goods Economist* praised Wanamaker for his leadership and retailers in Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, New York, and Nebraska soon followed his lead.

At the start of 1918, Wanamaker gathered his head buyers for a meeting in which he explained that it was “the most difficult time in our lives from any point of

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consideration: political, financial, commercial or any other.” Some of the merchandise that buyers had ordered two months in advance of the Christmas season was still lost on the railroads and overseas, its value decreasing with every day that passed. “Hardly anything,” he reported, was coming in from abroad. “No matter if we could buy all the rugs in Turkey,” Wanamaker explained, “we couldn’t get them here.” Moreover, Americans were still not spending at prewar levels. He pleaded with his buyers “You have got to find a way to bring in the customers.” In advance of the third Liberty Loan drive in April 1918, buyers strategized with Wanamaker to develop a new promotion that directly linked merchandise sales and stock turnover to the liberty loan drive. As always, the promotion was framed as a program to ease the sacrifices the war thrust upon American consumers. In the midst of the third loan drive, Wanamaker’s announced that gross receipts for five days of sales at both the New York and Philadelphia stores would be used to purchase Liberty Loan subscriptions. During the sale, shopping at Wanamaker’s became equivalent to the purchase of a loan subscription. As a local Liberty Loan volunteer explained to the newspapers, “it seems there are a great many thousands of people who are perplexed by the difficulty of buying Liberty bonds at a time when they urgently need to buy clothing and furnishings. It is hard for them to decide what to do. The Wanamaker stores provide a plan by which they can do both.” The “Wanamaker Plan,” as newspapers began calling it, so effectively framed a drive to increase sales and overturn stocks as a patriotic national service that stores, hotels, and

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196 Meeting with Department Chiefs, December 28, 1917, WC HSP.
197 “Wanamaker Loan Plan Wins Recruits,” Philadelphia Inquirer, April 29, 1918 in World War One Scrapbook, WC HSP.
manufacturers in Philadelphia and New York printed advertisements affirming their allegiance with Wanamaker’s “whole-hearted, big-visioned patriotism.” The sale raised over five million dollars in Liberty Loan subscriptions, by far the largest grossing Liberty Loan promotion at a retail outlet during the First World War.

Well after the armistice in 1918, Wanamaker’s promotions remained entrenched in the language of fair prices and ideas about national service. In 1920, as prices continued to rise, Wanamaker orchestrated a twenty percent deduction sale on the entire inventory at his New York and Philadelphia stores. Top buyers and advertisers marketed the event as a “People’s Sale,” and a “sledgehammer blow,” that would “break the backbone of high prices.” National news outlets praised Wanamaker with headlines, such as: “While Economists Were Bewailing the High Cost of Living, Wanamaker’s Acted.” At the height of the sale, Wanamaker’s hit a record-setting total of over one million dollars in sales in a single day. The New York Times announced that the firm had set off a wave of price-cutting that spread throughout the country. So many newspapers reported on Wanamaker’s “revolutionary” sale that his advertisers released a full-page collage featuring clips of all the flattering headlines. In the center of the collage, advertisers included a caricature of Wanamaker depicted as a young, spry, and muscle-

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198 “We are Proud to Follow a Leader,” advertisement for Cadillac in World War One Scrapbook, WC HSP.
199 John Wanamaker to Josephus Daniels, letter, May 4, 1918, WC HSP.
200 “The One Big Thing That Everyone is talking About,” Evening Public Ledger, May 10, 1920, 7; “Stroke of a Pen that Was Like a Sledgehammer Blow,” Evening Public Ledger, May 6, 1920, 7.
201 While Economists Were Bewailing the High Cost of Living, Wanamaker’s Acted,” Evening Public Ledger, May 26, 1920, 9.
bound baseball player (he was, in fact, eighty-two years old). Swinging a heavy bat, Wanamaker’s caricature “knocked a homer” against the high cost of living.”

Consuming and citizenship had become inextricably intertwined in the first half of the twentieth century. One of the more compelling advertisements for the sale of Liberty Loans, which illustrated this clearly, came in April 1918 and was sponsored by twenty leading department stores in New York City, including Wanamaker’s, Macy’s, and Bloomingdale’s. The advertisement pictures a beautiful young woman cloaked in a long, shapeless dress and a dark head scarf characteristic of the city’s immigrant poor. In one hand she clutches her child, who dons an old-fashioned newsboy cap reminiscent of a Dickensian street urchin. In the other hand, she proudly raises to her heart a Liberty Loan subscription. Behind the poor young mother and her son, nearly a dozen much more fashionably dressed women swarm the sales counter at an unnamed department store, each one eager to subscribe for a Liberty Loan. Behind the counter boxes are stacked and labeled “Liberty bonds,” underneath a sign calling bonds the “best bargain in the world.” The caption on the advertisement targeted women with the question: “Are We Women Just Bargain Hunters, After All?” Surely advertisements like this one taught Americans to associate their national identity with spending, but in the World War I-era department store the link between citizenship and spending took on even more particular meanings, extending well beyond the carefully constructed imagery and language employed by professional advertisers on New York’s Madison Avenue. Everyday Americans mingled

together in amid aisles filled crockery, home furnishing, or sportswear and performed their citizenship through the purchase of Paris or patriotic fashions, and most clearly through their participation in Liberty Loan drives. Whatever the motivation—profits or patriotism, and often both at the same time—America’s retailers ensured that women were never merely bargain hunters, but rather informed witnesses to events developing abroad or critical participants in national mobilization programs.²⁰⁴

CHAPTER THREE

A New Class of American Retailers Abroad:
National Tensions at the Overseas Trade Office in the 1920s

Introduction

In May 1927, as Charles Lindbergh famously touched down to a hero’s welcome just outside Paris, Frank J. Scheidecker left his office at 5 Cité Paradis, in the heart of the commissionaire district, for Zurich. He regretted missing Lindbergh, whom he regarded as a “superman,” capable of “eradicating the distances that separated the world’s people.” In his own line of work, Scheidecker aspired to eradicate distances too. Born in Switzerland, he had spent most of the previous two decades managing American retail trade offices in Paris, first for New York’s B. Altman Co., and then for the Associated Merchandising Corporation (AMC), the largest cooperative buying association for department stores in the United States. In 1926 the AMC created a new executive post for Scheidecker: General Manager of Foreign Offices in Europe. His trip to Zurich marked the beginning of an extended tour of AMC trade offices in Vienna,
Chenmitz, Gablonz, Berlin, Brussels, Belfast, and London. He also spent time in Milan where, although prices on silks and drapery remained high, he suggested opening a new office the following year. When Scheidecker returned to Paris he organized the first meeting to include all of the AMC European office managers. They gathered in Brussels in July and, with the blessing of the American retailers on the AMC executive board, Scheidecker did his resolute best to implement new systems of organization across the foreign offices. He insisted that all staff in Europe ought to send the same interim reports on orders to the New York office, keep the same general files on all local manufacturers, conform to the same systems of classification and numbering, and so on. “If we want to get a real wholesome organization in Europe,” Scheidecker wrote to AMC executives in the United States, “the foreign offices should consider themselves as part of a whole... and [ought to understand] that they do not work for just one office but for the AMC. That is, for all our stores.”

By the end of the decade at least some of the foreign representatives of the AMC may have recognized their offices “as part of a whole,” but the extent to which that “whole” might be considered American remained debatable.

Although the spread of the AMC across Europe seems to fit neatly into a widely accepted narrative about the advance of American commerce abroad in the twenties, it would be a mistake to cast foreign retail trade offices as another brand of imperial outpost. To be sure, department stores often framed their expansion in imperial terms, as in a 1929 advertisement for Filene’s department store, which featured an abstract map of

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209 “Minutes of Meeting Held by Foreign Office Managers in Brussels,” July 11-12, 1927; FJS to Louis E. Kirstein [hereafter LEK], letter, July 19, 1927, “Scheidecker, 1927-31” Box 80, LEK HBL.
the world above the boast: “In 1909 our buying was confined to a radius of a few hundred miles. Today, in 1929 the world is our hunting ground!”210 Yet, unlike the oft-studied Ford Motor Corporation, Hollywood production studios, or even chain stores like Woolworth’s, department store executives had no stake in exporting American merchandise or values to Europe or anywhere else.211 Quite the reverse: American retailers expanded abroad in order to import more and higher quality merchandise at lower prices, and to enhance their prestige in the United States through association with the Europe’s most fashionable people and places. As Kristin Hoganson has shown, foreign imports played a critical role in shaping notions of American domesticity, but the French frocks, British sport coats, and German gloves that filled American closets did not arrive there on their own. For a large sector of the American public, especially middle class white women, department stores were the foremost purveyors of the merchandise that shaped what Hoganson has incisively labeled the “consumers’ imperium.” And despite the imperial and racist undertones inherent in many imported fashions—how else might one make sense of American interest in folk fashions from the Balkan war zone or boudoir attire from Japan?—the process by which these goods entered department stores

looked nothing like the American domination of foreign markets. On the contrary, American retailers prized alliances with their counterparts in Europe and depended on the special skills and expertise of foreign residents, especially in France. Indeed, in the American retail industry, expansion abroad more closely resembled an unending series of trials in transatlantic cooperation, in which American methods and expectations rarely trumped local knowledge and customs.

The AMC was not the first group of American retailers to establish cooperative trade offices in Europe, but the corporation set new terms for the retail trade abroad and quickly became an industry leader. Established in 1918, the AMC grew out of the Retail Research Association (RRA), a group of innovative and independent American retailers committed to the scientific study of a wide variety of retail problems. Several RRA studies revealed widespread frustration over the longstanding commissionaire system of foreign trade in which smaller retailers contracted with foreign firms to manage their buying overseas. Nine RRA member stores agreed to form the AMC as an experiment in the group buying method of merchandising; that is, the practice of increasing buying power by placing high volume orders with manufacturers for distribution through multiple stores. After the AMC established its first foreign offices in London, Paris, and Berlin between 1920-1921 all eighteen RRA member stores joined the AMC, and the two associations, although legally separate corporations, became linked in every other sense, sharing the same executive board, stockholders, and committee members. The RRA-AMC represented influential department stores in cities across the United States from the Emporium in San Francisco and the J. L. Hudson Company in Detroit to Joseph Horne
Co. in Pittsburgh and Filene’s of Boston. No two executives did more than Lincoln Filene and Louis Kirstein, the co-owner and Vice President of Filene’s in Boston respectively, to ensure the success of the AMC overseas. By the middle of the decade the group wielded more buying power in Europe than the much older, perennial retail and wholesale giants such as Macy’s, Wanamaker’s, Gimbels, and Marshall Field’s. The AMC ushered in a dramatic shift in the balance of power in the American retail industry; one that allowed otherwise inconsequential AMC member stores situated well outside New York City, like L. & S. Ayres of Indianapolis and William Taylor Son & Co. of Cleveland, to sell the latest Paris fashions at prices that compared favorably with longtime industry leaders such as Macy’s and Gimbels.212

Although the AMC was legally an American corporation and ostensibly run by an American executive board, Europeans staffed and managed the foreign offices. When Kirstein and Filene traveled to Europe in 1919 to lay the groundwork for the first AMC trade offices abroad, they considered alliances with local retailers to be an integral part of developing foreign trade operations. And no single retail firm was more vital to the success of the AMC than Harrods of London, whose top executives hired and trained British buyers to run the AMC offices not only in London, but also in Berlin. In administrative terms, managers of the AMC foreign offices aspired to implement trade systems developed by the staff at Harrods’ Paris office, rather than import any uniquely

American model. While a shared interest in the cheap postwar German trade fueled the partnership between the AMC and Harrods, American retailers found no common ground with fellow retailers in Paris who looked abroad primarily for consumer markets in which to sell their own manufactured goods. With no institutional partner in Paris comparable to Harrods, the AMC office there took longer to establish and was never as well organized as those in London and Berlin. Still, Paris fashions marked the epicenter of the American retail trade, as they had for decades, and the AMC Paris headquarters quickly became the corporation’s most important location in Europe. Nearly one hundred fifty American buyers visited the office annually and around three dozen French worked there year round. The AMC’s French trade was profitable and helped, in no small terms, to establish the corporation as an industry leader.

No cooperative association of retailers anywhere in the world did as large a business in Europe as the AMC, but that did not preclude the corporation from the resentments that pitted resident staff against visiting American buyers and vice versa. In 1927 Kirstein wrote to Scheidecker insisting that the resident staff at the corporation’s foreign offices ought to show more “sympathetic consideration” for the challenges American buyers faced when they visited the markets abroad, where many did not know the local languages or customs. In the highly competitive and financially uncertain Paris fashion trade, tensions ran especially high and, more often than not, broke along national lines. Despite repeated requests from the American executive board that only English be spoken in the Paris office, French staff continued to speak and work in their own language. The language barrier fostered deep feelings of mistrust between French and
American employees of the AMC working in Paris, and to a lesser extent in other cities. Even by the end of the decade, the Paris office manager, a Frenchman named Edouard Léon, was still trying to persuade his staff that they worked in service of an American corporation. Indeed, the Paris headquarters of the AMC lacked any sense of what Léon called the “American spirit,” but the trade progressed regardless, because for American retailers imports from the fashion capital of the world were an essential part of their business.

As Kirstein once explained, “the success or failure of a department depends, to a certain extent... on the merchandise which buyers secure while they are abroad, both with respect to quantity and quality.” For the nearly twenty department stores that entered into the AMC in 1918 the corporation’s expansion in Europe contributed significantly to the success of many departments in their flagship stores. As the American drapery buyer Richard Owen boasted to his superiors at the AMC member store J. L. Hudson Co. of Detroit from the Paris office in 1922, “we will have some French merchandise this fall that ought to make the ‘Fifth Floor’ famous!” Yet, it would be remiss to cast the American retail trade that brought famous French draperies to Detroit as another in a long line of American commercial conquests abroad. In fact, the AMC retail trade succeeded precisely because it was not wholly American, but rather comprised of nationally distinct parts, some of which were more British or more French than the imperial tone of member stores’ advertising might suggest. Retail trade offices functioned less like extensions of a

213 LEK to FJS, letter, December 8, 1927 “Scheidecker 1927-31,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
214 “Report of Mr. R. Owen’s Foreign Trip,” July 29, 1921, “Hudson,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
market empire, than as cultural and commercial “contact zones” in which American and European buyers negotiated both terms of sale and each other’s differences amid larger international tensions. From the perspective of American retailers, commercial expansion abroad demanded extensive negotiation and cooperation, rather than “Americanization.”

How Harrods Made the AMC Beyond the Paris Markets

“Paris is of course the most interesting place in the world,” Louis Kirstein wrote from his makeshift office on the Champs Elysees in February 1919. “It seems that everybody from anywhere is here and if some big things are not put across it won’t be because there are no master minds trying to.” Like many American businessmen who flooded the French capital after the armistice, Kirstein, too, was trying to accomplish big things. During the war, he had held several posts in Washington, the last of which was Chief of Clothing Procurement under the Office of the Quartermaster of the United States Army.

Little over one week after the armistice Kirstein had submitted a proposal to sell

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215 In *Consumers’ Imperium*, Hoganson treats American homes as “contact zones.” She argues that households were not “thoroughly domestic,” but rather “places of encounter that can help us reconsider the idea of the United States as home.” Whereas Hoganson uses the concept to reveal that “foreign inflections of ‘home,’” this chapter uses the concept to illuminate the foreign influences on American retail trade offices. In so doing, it challenges a number of studies that have emphasized the “Americanization of the world” paradigm, which has not considered the “foreign inflections” in American commerce abroad. See: Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2007), 8. For studies that emphasize the “Americanization of the World” paradigm, see: fn 7.

216 LEK to A. Printz, letter, February 7, 1919, “Overseas Correspondence,” Box 37, LEK HBL.

217 Kirstein spent much of the war in Washington resolving labor conflicts first as Chairman of the Board of Control for Labor Standards in Army Clothing alongside Florence Kelley and Sidney Hillman, and then as Administrator for Labor Standards under the Quartermaster of the United States Army. See “L.E. Kirstein to Aid
vast quantities of surplus U.S. army stocks, including both uncut materials and manufactured items, in Europe in order to prevent the “dumping” of these items on American markets. Kirstein volunteered himself to chair the commission to oversee that project and by January 1, 1918 he had secured an office and sample room at the Elysees Palace Hotel. As an envoy attached to the American Expeditionary Forces in France, Kirstein negotiated deals with national representatives from Belgium, Romania, and Serbia, and he entertained proposals from an array of foreign commissionaires and manufacturers. 218 When he was not selling army surplus stocks, he kept busy working on another “big thing.” Alongside Anne Evans, one of the most celebrated American resident buyers in Paris, he toured clothing design houses and met with French manufacturers to gather information on the Paris fashion trade. “With the information you bring back,” Lincoln Filene wrote to Kirstein, “we can clinch the matter and get the AMC office started as soon as we wish.” 219

In the aftermath of the First World War, a new class of retailers led by Kirstein and Filene joined together through the AMC to set the foundation for what would become the most influential American buying operation in Europe. They considered alliances with retailers based in Europe essential partly because AMC executives had less experience in the overseas trade than executives at larger, more established firms like

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218 LEK to Brigadier General Wood, memorandum, December 25, 1918, “Overseas Correspondence,” LEK to General H. L. Rogers, memorandum, March 18, 1919, “Personal,” Box 37, LEK HBL.
219 Lincoln Filene to Louis Kirstein, letters, February 4, 1919, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
Wanamaker’s and Macy’s. Beyond that, transatlantic retail alliances promised valuable insights into foreign markets and access to experienced local buyers in the region. Early on, Filene and Kirstein even hoped that their trade offices might be situated inside department stores in London and Paris, thereby cutting their own costs, reducing their liabilities, and gaining the prestige of an address already well known to local manufacturers and designers. In London, they succeeded in negotiating a vital partnership with Harrods that worked largely because AMC executives shared the London firm’s desire to buy cheap merchandise in postwar German markets as soon as possible. French retailers, on the other hand, had less interest in buying German wares than they did in exporting their own readymade fashions, confections, to German consumers. Kirstein and Filene attempted to court a number of French retailers to establish an alliance comparable to that of Harrods in London, but these relationships foundered over differences in language, culture, and business interests. As a result, the AMC offices in London and Berlin opened without a hitch under the direction of managers hand-picked and trained by Harrods. It took a full year longer for AMC executives to secure stable leadership at the Paris trade office, and even then the French headquarters would never run as smoothly as the offices operating with Harrods’ support in London and Berlin.

By 1919 both Kirstein and Filene had become successful retailers, but neither had an upbringing that compared with their contemporaries at the country’s largest and oldest firms, such as Rodman Wanamaker or Jesse Isidor Straus. Kirstein was the son of a

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220 By the time Kirstein went abroad after the war, Wanamaker’s had owned a successful trade office in Paris for more than thirty years.

221 “French to Seek World Market in Standardization,” WWD, March 1, 1919, 1, 21.
German Jewish lens grinder who fled Leipzig in the wake of the revolutionary uprisings in 1848. He was born in Rochester, New York in 1867 and left home at the age of sixteen to ride the rails and do a host of odd jobs, including peddling patent medicine and playing on a semi-professional baseball team. He earned a reputation as a kind of maverick and his future prospects were bleak. Before he married his wealthy and well-connected wife, Rose Stein, in 1896, her family had begged her to give him up. Filene’s upbringing was not nearly as rough and tumble as Kirstein’s, but it was hardly more cosmopolitan. Also the son of German Jewish immigrants, Filene split his youth between his father’s small and moderately successful dry goods shops in Salem and Boston, Massachusetts. Neither Kirstein nor Filene finished high school, let alone college, and neither had traveled outside the country before the age of forty. By contrast, Wanamaker and Straus both received Ivy League educations (at Princeton and Harvard respectively), where they learned French and German and studied European art and history. As children, both Straus and Wanamaker spent considerable time in Europe and came to regard Paris as a second home; both would live there off and on over the course of their lives. Wanamaker and Straus had grown up the sons of millionaires whereas Kirstein and Filene had grown up the sons of immigrants. Like John Wanamaker and Isidor Straus before them, Kirstein and Filene would bring their children to Europe and give them Ivy

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222 Edward Filene, Lincoln’s older and better known brother did study some German and spent one year at the Handels Institute, an academy for boys in Seignitz, Germany where his mother’s family lived. He aspired to attend Harvard College and passed the entrance exams. Shortly before beginning his classes, Edward’s father fell ill and he took over the Filene’s business. Edward kept and cherished his invitation to Harvard College all his life. See: George E. Berkley, *The Filene’s* (International Pocket Library, 1998), 29-30.

223 Rodman Wanamaker lived in Paris between in the 1890s and Straus moved there in 1933 when he accepted an appointment from Roosevelt to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to France.
League educations. However, when the two AMC executives went abroad in 1919 to establish the corporation’s first foreign trade offices they brought with them none of the advantages of their peers.224

What Kirstein and Filene did bring to Europe was a vital connection to Frank Chitham, an influential member of the executive board at Harrods of London. Kirstein first encountered Chitham in 1909 while working under the direction of his father-in-law, Nathaniel Stein of Stein-Bloch Co. in Rochester, New York. At the time Chitham was running the men’s wear department at Selfridge & Co. and had contracted with Stein Bloch to sell what he claimed were the first American-made men’s suits in London. As Kirstein climbed the executive ladder at Filene’s beginning in 1911 he kept up his friendship with Chitham, who regularly advised Filene’s buyers on the latest trends in London and Paris. In fact, when Filene’s buyers traveled abroad they stopped first at Selfridges where Chitham put them in touch with local buyers in their lines. During the First World War, Chitham left Selfridges to join Harrods’ executive board and brought his friendship with Kirstein and connection to Filene’s with him.225 Under Chitham’s


direction in June 1919, Harrods officially joined the RRA/AMC, a move that added considerable prestige to the corporation’s activities in Europe.

When Filene brought an AMC exploratory committee on a European trip to advance plans for overseas trade offices in September 1919, they relied heavily on Harrods’ resources. In fact, the committee spent three weeks studying British markets inside temporary offices Chitham arranged for them at Harrods flagship store on Brompton Road. Filene’s committee gained every possible advantage working alongside Harrods’ buyers who introduced them to local manufacturers and to the managers at the British trade offices of both Wanamaker’s and Marshall Fields. Beyond Harrods, Filene and his committee held meetings with representatives from the British Industries, the Board of Trade, and the American Chamber of Commerce, and became acquainted with the commercial attaché at the U.S. Embassy. “It is very evident,” Filene wrote to Kirstein in Boston, “that this market wants to sell to America and will strain every point to do so if they can produce the goods.” Another member of the AMC committee, Charlie Steines of the Emporium in San Francisco, told Women’s Wear Daily, “We are ready to buy almost anything [the British] could produce: woolens, cottons, linens, hosiery, toys, brushes, porcelain wares. The world is hungering for British goods.”

Although Filene and Steines recognized that British manufacturers, still recovering from the war, faced both labor shortages and industrial unrest, they agreed that a trade office in London

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226 “Found England Unprepared for Large Orders,” WWD, November 26, 1919, 1, 47.
would be “of great value” to the AMC. Before leaving London, they offered the job of managing the office to the current head of Wanamaker’s trade operations in the city.227

By the time Wanamaker’s lead London buyer turned down the AMC’s offer, Filene, Steines, and the rest of the exploratory committee had already returned to the United States. Without missing a beat Chitham and Sir Woodman Burbidge, senior director and joint-owner of Harrods, continued the search for an AMC manager and even located an appropriate building to house the new office. In December Chitham and Burbidge recommended a man whom they had interviewed twice and considered the top candidate. AMC executives were initially skeptical of A. E. Robins who had spent thirty years as a manager in the banking industry. Robins had no experience in merchandising, but Chitham insisted he was the best man for the job.228 Burbidge, too, considered Robins a “a man of wide outlook, good general knowledge, and of proved ability.” Once the AMC executive board approved Robins’ hire, Chitham invited the new manager to spend several weeks at Harrods’ Paris office to study the retail trade and learn something about merchandising. Harrods’ “trade systems” in Paris, Chitham argued, could “in many respects be with advantage adopted in the proposed [AMC] London office.”229 Filene was thrilled. He considered Harrods’ Paris office the best in the city and had described its manager as a “very excellent man.” “If we could find his duplicate,” Filene once wrote, “we should ask nothing better” for the AMC offices.230 During the winter of 1919 and

227 LF to LEK, letters, September 24 & October 3, 1919, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
228 “Retail Research Manager Arrives in New York,” WWD, March 15, 1920, 1, 44.
229 Correspondence between Chitham and LEK, letters, November 24, December 18 & 23 1919, January 6, 1920, “Harrods Chitham, 1918-1930,” Box 77, LEK HBL.
230 LF to LEK, letter, October 14, 1919, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
1920 Robins spent weeks studying Harrods’ “trade systems” in Paris, and in the spring he set out on a tour of AMC member stores across the eastern United States to get a sense of American tastes.

During the summer of 1920, Robins opened the AMC’s first foreign trade office on London’s Oxford Street, just a few blocks from the hustle and bustle at Selfridges. As Robins explained to *Women’s Wear Daily*, his staff aimed to “smooth out difficulties so that when an American buyer comes over here he will know just where to find the things he requires.”¹⁴¹ Ten British employees kept the office running, including a merchandise manager, a market reporter, and an office manager who oversaw six clerks and stenographers in charge of checking orders, processing payments, organizing shipments, and making any other necessary arrangements for visiting American buyers. Robins hosted thirty to forty AMC buyers during the 1920 fall season and he met with each one of them personally upon their arrival. Buyers also met with the merchandising manager who provided a detailed overview of the best current samples in their lines. Robins also compiled a twenty-five page “London Office Guide” designed to orient buyers not only to the office, but also to the best markets in Britain.²³² The guide included information about shipping, exchange rates, and the best hotels and restaurants in the city. It also indexed the most important and most obscure manufacturing centers in Britain across every line from brass goods and boots to muslins and silk hosiery. Carpet buyers, for example, were encouraged to visit the lesser known centers of Ayr and Kidderminster, as

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¹⁴¹ “RRA Stores Will Buy for Cash, Says London Manager,” *WWD*, February 6, 1920, 1, 64.
²³² “Return After Opening RRA Office in Paris,” *WWD*, July 13, 1920, 64.
well as Edinburgh. Nearly one year after the London office opened, Kirstein happily reflected that “the more I see of this London office, the better pleased I am with it. I think they do an excellent job pleasing the buyers of the stores, which is not a particularly easy job.”

Harrods executives had done much to ensure that the AMC’s London trade office would be a success, but their reasons for doing so were hardly philanthropic. From the beginning, Chitham backed the AMC because he looked forward to setting up a powerful cooperative trade office in Germany. Despite their eagerness to take advantage of favorable trade conditions in German markets, both American and British retailers feared reprisals from consumers if they sold German wares too soon. “We have not met an Englishman, starting with Mr. Chitham on down who does not want to buy German goods at the earliest possible moment,” Filene had explained in 1919. But, he added, “so many sons have been killed and wounded by the Germans that there is a very strong antipathy here to anything German.” By 1920, however, that antipathy had faded, even in the United States where congress had yet to approve a peace treaty with Germany. As Women’s Wear Daily pointed out, American manufacturers had not met the standards set by their German counterparts, especially in toy lines. “German leadership in the industry has not been overcome,” noted one reporter studying the proliferation of German labels on department store shelves. In October 1920, official trade reports indicated a steep rise

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234 LEK to LF, letter, April 29, 1921, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
235 Lincoln Filene to LEK, letter, September 24, 1919, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
in German imports across the United States—quadruple the figures for the same month in 1919 and not far behind figures for imports from France. Indeed, around the same time that Robins opened the office on Oxford Street, Harrods joined the AMC in negotiating an exclusive contract for joint representation in Cologne, Germany through Roger M. C. Day, a young Englishman who had overseen Harrods’ purchases in the region before the First World War. Less than one year later, in the spring of 1921, the AMC purchased a permanent regional trade office on Lindenstrasse in the center of the Berlin’s bustling export district. They sent Day to the London office to learn Harrods’ trade systems from Robins, including preferred policies on coding merchandise, placing orders, record keeping, and correspondence. For the next twenty years Harrods would conduct the largest trade through Berlin of any AMC member store, and Day remained at the helm until grave political differences with AMC leadership forced his departure in 1932.

For Kirstein and Filene, developing a trade office in Paris could not have been more different from their experiences in London and Berlin. Since at least the turn of the twentieth century, Filene’s and other AMC member stores had conducted their trade in Paris by paying foreign commissionaire firms to represent their interests in the markets.

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237 LEK to Chitham, letter, June 22, 1922, “Harrods Chitham, 1918-1930,” Box 77; LEK to LF, letter, April 29, 1921,” Lincoln Filene correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL; “Toys Largest Item Bought in German Markets,” WWD, June 14, 1921, 40; “Says Goods on Vienna Market Maintain Prewar Standards,” WWD, April 30, 1921, 33; “Harrods May Be Active in German Marts,” WWD, June 28, 1921, 1.
Suspicions that foreign commissionaires did not deliver a fair deal on imports had always
dogged the transatlantic trade. Even in 1879 when John Wanamaker sent his first buyer to
reside permanently in Paris he explained that the buyer’s purpose was to “study foreign
markets and skim the cream,” by which he meant to cut out commissions paid to
unreliable middlemen. After 1900, however, a growing number of wealthy and
college-educated American women moved to Paris to build careers as resident buyers,
and they reinforced the idea that foreign commissionaires were cheats. In 1912 resident
buyer and correspondent for Women’s Wear Daily, Edith L. Rosenbaum wrote a cover
article in which she alleged that, “we Americans do not get as fair treatment when our
business goes through a commissionaire.” An honest commissionaire, Rosenbaum
lamented, “was a very good thing, but a very rare one.” Another resident buyer wrote
in from Paris to agree with Rosenbaum, pointing that the French worked “both ends of
the game” by collecting commission fees from manufacturers and passing them on in
higher prices to retailers. Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century
Filene’s maintained contracts with several foreign commissionaires in France and across
Europe, but American resident buyers Anne Evans and Faith Chipperfield were, far and
away, their most valuable connections in Paris. Between 1912 and 1919, Evans and

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239 In addition to writing for Women’s Wear and the Ladies’ Trade Record, Rosenbaum represented the
interests of more than one hundred American wholesale, retail, and manufacturing firms in Paris by selling
fashion sketches or purchasing samples of the latest French models in women’s dresses, underwear,
millinery and more. Although she worked along the very same lines as a French commissionaire,
Rosenbaum hesitated to call herself one, instead claiming that she was merely “a sort of buyer for various
people.” Information on Rosenbaum’s fascinating life and career are gleaned from transcripts of Edith L.
Rosenbaum vs. Sun Printing and Publishing Association, June 4, 1914, Supreme Court Appellate Division
(New York, NY: The Reporter, Co., 1914); Also see: “American Offices in Paris,” WWD, January 3, 1912, 1;
Chipperfield ran a wildly successful buying operation and sent sketches, samples, and fashion reports to dozens of American department stores, including Bonwit Teller, Bambergers, and a number of future AMC-member stores, direct from Paris.240

When Kirstein visited Paris in January 1919 to sell army surplus stocks, he relied on Evans as a tour guide, translator, and networker. She put him in touch with executives at the top department stores in Paris, including Le Printemps, Bon Marché, Louvre, and Galeries Lafayette, and she attended many of the meetings as a translator. However, none of the meetings amounted to much. At Louvre, an executive named Machart confided in Kirstein that he wanted to create an American department that would sell only merchandise produced in the United States. He inquired as to whether the AMC would serve as a commissionaire for his buyers in New York, but Kirstein demurred. The AMC was not in the business of selling American exports and the executives parted ways.241

Kirstein had the most success with Théophile Bader, cofounder of the Galeries Lafayette, who revealed that his firm was preparing to send an executive to the United States for the first time to study American consumer markets and explore possibilities for establishing a manufacturing and retail branch in New York. Bader explained that the firm, which was then producing confections valued at over one hundred million francs annually, was making large investments in its factories and planned to sell lower-priced French fashions

241 Evans to LEK, letter, March 5, 1919, “Business Methods,” Box 22, LEK HBL; Machart’s desire to buy more American made articles after the First World War was fairly common among European retailers, see: “Found England Unprepared for Large Orders,” WWD, November 26, 1919, 1, 47.
abroad to American and German consumers. Bader’s plans placed the Galeries Lafayette in direct competition with AMC member stores, unless Kirstein was willing to sign an fairly exclusive contract to buy fashions manufactured at the Galeries Lafayette—he was not. Moreover, Bader resented the AMC’s proposed trade office in Paris, which only threatened to bring more competition in haute couture samples and manufacturing materials. Despite these conflicts of interest, for a brief period in 1919 Bader, Kirstein, and Filene seemed to think they could help each other. Each side was eager to learn more about markets and manufacturing on the opposite shores of the Atlantic.

When Filene visited Paris in October 1919 with the very same AMC exploratory committee that had spent three weeks together in offices expressly arranged for them at Harrods, they learned quickly that Bader would offer them no similar level of support. Filene had been under the impression that the committee would be welcome to use temporary offices at the Galeries Lafayette, permitted interviews with French buyers, and granted access to other administrative supports, but nothing of the sort came to pass. Instead AMC executives spent most of their time in Paris working out of the Hotel Continental and studying the trade offices run by large American and British firms, including Wanamaker’s, Macy’s, Gimbel Brothers, Marshall Fields, and Harrods. Filene only met with Bader sometime during the committee’s second week in the city and his goal was merely “try to get some clear idea of what they have in mind in the way of using

242 See “Notes Made by Mr. Filene on Foreign Trip,” “Lincoln Filene correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
243 “Denies Galeries Plan Branch Here ‘At this Time,’” WWD, December 23, 1919, 1; “Details on Figures on Galeries Lafayette Given by Mr. Bader,” January 18, 1919; “Notes from the Bon Marché, n.d., “Business Methods” Box 22, LEK HBL.
us and of our using them.” Not surprisingly, the meeting fell flat. Evans had not been available to accompany Filene as an interpreter and so the two executives relied on Bader’s son-in-law to translate. And according to Filene, his understanding of English was “very limited.” “I cannot tell you exactly what kind of progress we are making,” Filene wrote to Kirstein in exasperation. He concluded, however, that the Galeries Lafayette “are really too busy to be of use to us and are too busy for us to use them.”

During the summer of 1919 the leading French retail and manufacturing firm had pursued its plans to expand to the United States, but by October they were no longer interested. After an extended tour studying American retailing and manufacturing, mostly in New York, one of the firm’s top executives, Pierre Wertheimer, told Women’s Wear Daily that they were abandoning plans to open a U.S. branch “at this time.” Instead Bader, Wertheimer, and nearly every other manufacturer and retailer in France had their eyes fixed on Germany.

Despite their failures to establish any meaningful connection with a French retailer, the AMC committee nonetheless determined that the time was right to do so. Paradoxically, Filene argued that the inflated prices across Paris combined with the growing interest in German consumers made establishing a trade office there imperative. Filene wrote at length to Kirstein about how the prices across Paris were “beyond comprehension.” Inflation had affected every sector of the economy including food, lodging, and transportation, and the impact on the fashion industries appeared to be

\footnote{Denies Galeries Plan Branch Here ‘At this Time,’” Women’s Wear Daily, December 23, 1919, 1; LF to LEK, letters, October 10 & 14, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.}
especially acute. During the war two-fifths of the French textile industry’s productive capacity, especially in cottons and woollens, had been amputated by the German occupation, or otherwise immobilized. A considerable percentage of silk factories, too, had converted to wartime production, especially for the growing air force. Despite remarkable efforts to rebuild these industries, especially in the devastated north, only three quarters of those businesses damaged during the war were partially or fully operational by 1923. Although many French couturiers accordingly turned towards readily available silk blends like crepe de chine and satin, the shortage of domestic textiles drove up the prices of both couture and confections. Filene reported that French retailers were so short on gloves that their buyers were placing orders with manufacturers without even asking about the price. Steines described purchasing a pair of socks that might have cost thirty cents at home for nearly four francs at Bon Marché. Equally important, however, was the fact that the devaluation of the franc placed the French at an advantage when selling to Germany and at a disadvantage when selling to the United States. “You hear on all sides here,” Filene reported, “that France is going to sell to Germany just as soon as she can and as much as she can.” Given the high prices and the pivot towards Berlin in the French fashion industries, Filene reasoned that the AMC desperately needed a trade office “run in our own individual interest in order to get

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a fair share for our markets of what is produced over here.” Without an office, he feared, the best fashions and the best prices would go to the Germans. Setting up a Paris trade office, however, took almost a full year longer than it had in London where Chitham and Burbidge had smoothed the path. If there were any lingering hopes for an alliance with the Galeries Lafayette, they faded as soon as the AMC announced definitive plans to open a Paris trade office. Not only did AMC executives have no French allies in the city, their best connections to the trade were all American women: Evans, Chipperfield, and Millie Kahn, a fashion specialist who had done some contract work with Filene’s through another commissionaire firm, Schoeniger & Roditti. Despite the fact that American women had reliably managed the purchase of French fashions for most of the AMC member stores since at least 1912, no executive approved of placing a woman at the head of a foreign trade office. The corporation spent months trying to hire a British or American man to head their proposed office without any success. As Kirstein confessed to Chitham, the situation in Paris was “very disappointing.” Ultimately, a newly formed foreign office committee, headed by Kirstein, agreed to place Kahn in charge of the office temporarily. The internal announcement of Kahn’s appointment awkwardly noted: “It is the purpose of the committee to probably eventually have a man in charge of the Paris office with Miss

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246 Lincoln Filene to Louis Kirstein, letters, October 10, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
247 LF to Bader, letter, “Galeries Lafayette,” Box 83, LEK HBL.
248 LEK to Chitham, letter, November 23, 1919, “Harrods Chitham, 1918-1930,” Box 77, LEK HBL.
Kahn as his assistant.”  

Still, trade journals reported Kahn’s appointment as though she were, in fact, the AMC’s new Paris manager and an equal partner to Robins in the London office. Filene wrote confidentially to Kirstein that he ought to make crystal clear to Kahn that her leadership role was only temporary: “It might seem as if she was to be the head of the Paris office, but this I am sure you do not mean.” In fact, Kahn did run the Paris office for nearly nine months and even handled the foreign office committee’s bungled attempt to purchase a headquarters that Kirstein ultimately determined were not right for the work. Not surprisingly, Kahn left the AMC soon after the executive board hired Frank J. Scheidecker, a Swiss and the longtime assistant manager of B. Altman Co.’s trade office in Paris, to take her place. Kahn’s departure left a second vacancy in the leadership of the Paris office that would not be filled until 1921, although this time around the firm would promote a young French buyer already working in the Paris office named Edouard Léon.

A wave of optimism for trade in Europe, especially in German markets, washed over the American retail industry during the summer of 1921. “The entire industrial Europe is doing its best to come back,” Horace A. Saks of Saks & Co. department store told reporters after returning from a tour of France, Germany, and England. Saks insisted that Europeans were “working hard to recoup their losses” and that this was most

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249 “Extract from letter from Alvin Dodd,” January 8, 1920; Filene to LEK, letter, January 20, 1920, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL; “Retail Research to Use Paris Office for Large Purchases,” WWD, March 8, 1920, 48, 47.
250 LF to LEK, letter, June 22, 1920, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL.
251 In their initial search for managers Scheidecker did not make the final cut. Kahn went on to establish a successful partnership with Parisian couturière, Madame Reine. LF to LEK, letter, October 14, 1919, June 22, 1920, “Lincoln Filene Correspondence,” Box 65, LEK HBL; “Scheidecker Plans to Take Vacation,” WWD, July 3, 1931, 7; “Finish Purchase of RRA Foreign Office,” WWD, September 10, 1920, 40.
noticeable in Germany. Scores of executives and buyers returning from their spring trips to Europe, including those from the AMC, echoed Saks’ hopeful assessment. Kirstein, too, marveled at how much improved was the “temperament and appearance of the German people,” and posited that the impending acceptance in congress of peace terms “will remove much of the uncertainty that has hampered Germany’s commercial operations.”

Riding the wave of optimism, AMC executives, including Chitham, embarked on their first big ventures in cooperative buying. “I have always believed,” Kirstein wrote to Chitham in 1921, “that the future of our association depends on the AMC and the harnessing of the purchasing powers for the advantage of all.”

Their first big deal came that same year, for “ten thousand dozens” of pairs of hosiery manufactured in Germany to be distributed to nearly two dozen stores across the United States, and to Harrods. No single retailer or group of retailers in Europe could place such large orders and none could secure lower manufacturing costs. Four years later, in 1925, the head of the National Department Stores Group, a new competitor to the AMC representing department stores mainly on the west coast, would tell the New York Times that group buying was “the most important step in the development of retailing in this country. The store that is ‘going it alone’ is finding itself at a disadvantage in competing locally with stores operating in a group abroad.” He was right. And no corporation did group buying better than the AMC—even in the highly competitive Paris markets.

252 “Europe Trying to Come Back,” WWD, June 22, 1921, 1; “Ellis Gimbel Returns from Trip Abroad,” WWD, June 22, 1921, 1; “See Europe Making Good Headway Now,” WWD, June 1, 1921, 1,4; “Labor is Europe’s Chief Commodity, Says Kirstein,” WWD, June 1, 1921, 1, 29.
253 LEK to Chitham, September 7, 1921, “Harrods Chitham, 1918-1930” Box 77, LEK HBL.

“No matter how lovely our own [American] creations, nor how charmingly we wear them,” wrote the AMC’s buyer Barbara Lee in a November 1923 advertisement in *Vogue*, “there is always a craving for at least one Paris frock in the wardrobe. Not a copy—but an original, designed and made in France.” According to the advertisement, Lee had just returned from Paris with dresses made “entirely by hand” and available exclusively at seventeen department stores across the country for the “incredibly small” price of $39.50. Sketches featuring women with unmistakably French names modeled Lee’s new styles in *Vogue*. Noèmie, for example, wore the finest Georgette crepe traced with a “daring block design in steel beads” and Mariette’s jet black Georgette featured exquisite crystal beading from neckline to hem. Department stores carrying the Barbara Lee frocks followed up the national advertising program in fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper’s* with their own local campaigns. “Never in the history of our buying experience,” announced a Filene’s advertisement in September 1923, “have we had a collection of French dresses as large, as varied, as intensively planned, or as rich in value.” Filene’s promoted the beadwork as more secure than the machine-made variety because “hundreds of French women working in the provinces” had fastened each one by hand with crochet hooks. Shoppers eager to purchase the Barbara Lee dresses overwhelmed the women’s department at Filene’s and the firm considered the new French line a success from every angle. Trade journals reported that American
manufacturers and retailers were “awed,” and irked, by just how low the Barbara Lee frocks were priced. While some criticized the quality of the materials, others called for higher tariffs to guard against bulk buying initiatives in France. Barbara Lee created a stir in Paris, too, where reporters from the local bureau of *Women’s Wear Daily* hassled Lee’s colleagues for advance details on the collection and competing American buyers pressed the AMC trade office for the names of manufacturers.  

Implicit in the 1923 advertising campaign for Barbara Lee French frocks were American preoccupations with price, piracy, and national origins. Although high prices and wild currency fluctuations continually threatened to undermine the American retail trade in Paris, the United States became the second largest export market for French fashions by the middle of the decade. The number of *haute couture* houses nearly tripled in the twenties, and a much larger shadow industry in fashion piracy grew up around them. Nearly every retailer in Paris copied original designs without purchasing the right to do so, but as Parisian couturiers mounted an increasingly public resistance to the practice the competition among American buyers for seemingly authentic French fashions grew fierce. The Barbara Lee French frocks gave the AMC an advantage, but the corporation was not immune to growing tensions between Americans and French in the

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fashion trade. Historians have argued persuasively that the Paris-based global fashion system spawned an “imagined community” of dress that spilled over national borders, and that was largely true for shoppers in Los Angeles or New York who encountered, for example, a cape designed in Paris by the Italian-born Elsa Schiaparelli and inspired by West African masks. However, for buyers working in the highly competitive and financially uncertain markets of interwar Paris, trade negotiations remained tense and often broke along national lines. In the AMC office visiting American buyers routinely suspected their French colleagues of working in the interest of their compatriot designers and manufacturers. In turn, the French staff resented their American colleagues who knowingly overlooked the unwritten rules of the trade and who made no effort to speak their language. Despite the AMC’s English language policy and its efforts to bring the office in line with administrative policies set by the London office, the Paris headquarters remained a French space, run largely by French buyers speaking the French language and, wherever possible, according to the traditions of the French fashion industries. American retailers did not, and could not, impose national models and methods on their foreign branches because the trade demanded transnational cooperation; the knowledge, expertise, and skills of local residents were too valuable. Remarkably, despite the

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257 Hoganson is careful to point out, however, that many of these “international” fashions romanticized imperial power. It is also Hoganson who applies Benedict Arnold’s notion of the “imagined community” to the Paris-based fashion industry in her 2007 Consumers’ Imperium, but most historians who touch on fashion emphasize the transnational nature of Paris-based designs. See: Hoganson, Consumers’ Imperium, 57-104; Valerie Steele, Paris Fashions: A Cultural History (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998); Marlis Schweitzer, “American Fashions for American Women: The Rise and Fall of Fashion Nationalism,” in Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture, and Consumers, ed. Regina Blaszczyk (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Stewart, Dressing Modern Frenchwomen.
contested national identity of the AMC Paris headquarters, the corporation was among the most successful trade operations in the city.

Barbara Lee’s French frocks made the AMC a major contender in the Paris fashion trade and, in many ways, set the mold for successful group buying in the American retail industry. Of course, Barbara Lee was fiction; a character created for the sake of sales promotions and clothing labels. In fact, a committee of five visiting American buyers from five independent AMC member stores were entrusted by the corporation to develop the frocks on behalf of all seventeen participating member stores. The committee spent four months during the summer of 1923 working closely with Scheidecker, then the Paris office manager, Léon, the assistant merchandise manager, and a number of clerks stationed at the AMC office in Paris to pull off the deal. They researched and selected twenty-four different styles of frocks inspired by haute couture (and likely copied from) models and manufactured en masse in France. The committee was able to secure such low prices because they placed orders that were unusually large for women’s dresses, a field that was not typically conducive to bulk buying given the frequent seasonal changes in styles. In the final tally, the AMC committed to purchasing 7,500 Barbara Lee frocks at the price point $39.50 and several thousand additional silk and cotton dresses to be sold at higher price points not associated with the Barbara Lee name.258 Women’s Wear Daily began reporting on the deal as front-page news months before the frocks arrived in the United States. According to correspondents from the Paris

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and New York bureaus, the Barbara Lee frocks had “stimulated the ambitions of several [competing American] dressmaking establishments to enter the bulk field” in partnership with French design copyists based in Paris.\textsuperscript{259} Staff at the AMC office also reported that Barbara Lee caused a “sensation” across the city and Scheidecker boasted that AMC buyers were now followed closely by competitors in the markets. “I can hardly move a finger,” Scheidecker wrote to Kirstein, “without making Lord & Taylor, Jordan Marsh, or McCreery wonder why I moved that finger and try their best to find out.”\textsuperscript{260} Between 1923 and 1925, a number of influential American retailers followed the AMC by entering into the group buying model, including Lord & Taylor, which added seven smaller retailers to its offices and operated under the name Allied Purchasing Corporation, and Gimbels, which joined with Saks and the May Stores to form the Gimbel Group.\textsuperscript{261} By the end of 1925 the AMC released an internal memo announcing that group buying was no longer an experiment, but rather “a merchandising method that has come to stay.”\textsuperscript{262}

The Barbara Lee deal exemplified group buying at its best, but the financial uncertainties that plagued the Paris fashion industries in the years following the First World War caused similar initiatives to stumble as often as they succeeded. In the United States, the election of Republican President Warren G. Harding in the midst of a postwar


\textsuperscript{260} FJS to LEK, August 14, 1822, “Barbara Lee,” Box 83; EL to LEK, letter, September 21, 1923, “Leon 1923-1926,” Box 79, LEK HBL.


\textsuperscript{262} “Principles and Practice of Group Buying in the Associated Merchandising Corporation,” January 1926, “Group Buying,” Box 83, LEK HBL.
recession brought renewed support for high protective tariffs. Concerns that deflation abroad would bring a flood of cheap foreign imports into domestic markets fueled the aggressively protectionist 1922 Fordney McCumber tariff, which restored rates to more or less the same level as the 1909 Payne Aldrich bill. Although proponents of the Fordney tariff were much more concerned with agriculture and raw materials than they were with fashion, the effect on the Paris fashion trade was significant. Rates on imported French gowns, coats, and gloves were set as high as sixty percent. As prices on Paris fashions soared, Kirstein lamented the Fordney bill privately in letters to Chitham and denounced it publicly in interviews for *Women’s Wear Daily*. Scheidecker, too, speculated that the tariff would force French manufacturers to turn away from longstanding American contracts in search of new markets, thus pushing prices even higher for American buyers. To make matters worse, the instability of the franc meant that even as prices remained high across the board, they also continued to fluctuate enough that buyers resisted placing large advance orders. As the franc strengthened in 1924, for example, an AMC group buying committee surveying the Paris millinery markets disbanded over fears that currency fluctuations might drastically increase landing costs (the price per item paid to manufacturers) after they placed orders. The same

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264 “Kirstein Sees Prices Abroad Soaring Higher,” *WWD*, July 26, 1923, 1, 24; LEK to Chitham, letter, November 13, 1922, “Harrods Chitham, 1918-1930,” Box 77, LEK HBL.


266 In this case, participating stores had agreed not to let landing costs exceed $7.50 so that each hat could sell at retail for $15. Rather than risk the chance of an increase that might negatively affect all participating
fears hampered group buying efforts across merchandise lines, including for the Barbara
Lee committee, and a number of AMC buyers left Paris without spending their full
allotments.\textsuperscript{267} The head of the Paris bureau for \textit{Women's Wear Daily} reported similar
trends across all the American retail trade offices in the city and even warned that there
were signs of a U.S. buyers strike in France.\textsuperscript{268} One year later, in 1925, the rapid decline
of the franc prompted new, and politically charged discussions over whether buyers
ought to pay French manufacturers in francs or dollars and American buyers feared
manufacturers’ ability to meet delivery deadlines.\textsuperscript{269} During the mid-twenties
Scheidecker and Léon spent as much time writing letters and reports about currency
exchanges and price fluctuations as they did orienting visiting buyers to the French
markets.\textsuperscript{270}

In spite of these financial uncertainties, the \textit{haute couture} industry grew
significantly over the course of the decade, and alongside it a shadow industry in fashion
piracy exploded. At the end of the First World War twenty-five couture houses
dominated Paris, but by 1925 the industry ballooned to include seventy-five houses
producing between one and three hundred original designs annually. In 1929 anywhere
from 200,000 to 300,000 Parisians worked in \textit{haute couture}, depending on the season,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{267}] Scheidecker to the Executive Committee and General Merchandise Managers, letter \& report, August 28, 1925, “Scheidecker 1924-27,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
\item[\textsuperscript{269}] FJS to LEK, letter, November 6, 1925, “Scheidecker, 1924-27,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
\item[\textsuperscript{270}] Currency exchange is a recurring topic in Scheidecker’s correspondence, see “Scheidecker, 1924-27,” Box 80; Reports and correspondence in “Franco Devaluation,” Box 83; also see: EL to LEK, August 7, 1925 \& August 10, 1926, “Leon 1923-26,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
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and roughly 150,000 more worked in associated industries such as embroidery or glovemaking. The major couture houses employed up to 3,000 workers apiece and churned out large collections featuring dozens of original designs twice yearly, as well as smaller collections for two mid-season shows. *Haute couture* was a big business and it owed much of its growth to increasing consumer demand in Britain and the United States, the first and second largest export markets for Paris fashions. Yet, the industry had long fostered contradictory attitudes towards copying. Couturiers had a stake in selling their designs exclusively to maximize profits, but they also depended on global publicity and the widespread circulation of their styles to gain notoriety and uphold the primacy of Paris as the world’s capital of fashion. During the twenties, however, the growth of illustrated fashion magazines, the fast pace of transatlantic communication, and the simpler, loose lines of newer styles made copying much harder to identify and regulate. Between two and five hundred illegal copy houses sprang up on the side streets and back alleys of Paris in the twenties—more than three times the number of couture houses—and nearly every foreign retail and wholesale trade office engaged in some form of piracy. Macy’s Paris office, for example, paid an American sketch artist to copy *haute couture* models and send her sketches to Austria to be manufactured into gowns and then exported to the U.S. at much lower costs. The AMC also retained a “European stylist,” Renée Marihart, who studied *haute couture* and then took her ideas to the Berlin office where, once again, these designs could be manufactured and exported for less.

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271 The United States was not a top export market for Paris fashions prior to the First World War, but became a major player in the 1920s.
Scheidecker ordered staff at all the AMC offices to ensure that Marihart’s connection to Berlin was kept “strictly confidential from French manufacturers and designers who otherwise may not give her the fullest cooperation.” To protect their profits and reputations, couturiers increasingly used negative publicity, in-house surveillance, and legal suits to cut down on piracy in both domestic and foreign markets. In 1927, for example, Madame Vallet of the house of Martial & Armand took to the newspapers in Paris and New York when she learned that the American-owned Bijou Dress Co. falsely claimed to have her exclusive styles available at retail for half the typical price. Under a large headline announcing “A Lie Nailed!” Vallet’s advertisement accused the American firm of “treachery which no right-minded business man or woman will condone.” However treacherous the practice may have been (copy houses, in particular, were regularly subject to police raids), fashion piracy remained so commonplace that by the end of the decade leading couturiers began developing their own inexpensive ready wear lines to undermine the practice.

Rising tensions over fashion piracy heightened competition among American buyers in Paris for exclusive access to haute couture designs that were demonstrably authentic. Macy’s became the envy of all American retailers when the firm’s Paris office secured exclusive rights to display sixteen haute couture gowns that were not only designed by the city’s most celebrated couturiers such as Callot, Worth, and Lanvin, but

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272 FJS to Phillip J. Reilly, December 16, 1930, “Scheidecker, 1927-1931,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
275 Stewart, Dressing Modern Frenchwomen, 132-33.
also modeled by an impressive coterie of titled French women for the benefit of the
French Red Cross. Macy’s celebrated “Fête of the French Red Cross” display filled the
show windows in New York’s Herald Square during the summer of 1927 and featured the
gowns placed alongside handwritten letters from the French noblewomen who modeled
them in Paris. The New York Times hailed the gowns as true “works of art” that “could
not be sold or copied, not commercialized in any way, only exhibited.” Upon hearing
about the display, Kirstein immediately wired Léon, who had taken over the management
of the Paris office in 1926, demanding an explanation as to why the AMC had not
secured these models. After all, that they had made a charitable contribution to the Red
Cross and paid to have resident French staff from their own office attend the event. Léon
apologized and explained that Macy’s’ Paris office donated a substantial sum of over one
hundred thousand francs, and in so doing secured the rights to display the gowns in New
York.276 “Had we been as generous as Macy’s, we certainly would have obtained these
models,” Léon admitted. The AMC’s loss was not so much because the firm was less
generous, but rather because the corporation’s Paris office did not have the authority to
make charitable contributions on behalf of all its member stores. Léon promised that if
the corporation would grant him discretional spending in such cases “Macy’s will not be
the only ones in the field when this happens again.” Still, he cautioned that the next

276 By any measure, the gowns were a steal for 100,000 francs. In 1930, before the depression pushed prices
down, the average cost of a gown designed by Lanvin was 6,650 francs. Regardless of how inflation might
have affected prices between 1927 and 1930, the French Fête models had considerably more value than the
average Lanvin because they had been worn by French nobility. Although the New York Times reported
that Macy’s had not purchased the right to copy the models (therefore possibly undermining their value),
it’s hard to believe they were not copied, anyway, given that there were absolutely no effective methods for
curtailing the practice, especially after these models left France. See Stewart, Dressing Modern
Frenchwomen, 85.
charity benefit to feature haute couture was sure to spark a bidding war between the top American retail trade offices in Paris.  

Indeed, by the middle of the decade, the Paris fashion trade had become so competitive for American buyers that charity events sparked bidding wars and espionage became a regular feature of the work undertaken at the AMC office. When buyers from AMC member stores visited Paris they badgered their French counterparts working under Léon for information about what competitors at Macy’s, Wanamaker’s, and Lord & Taylor were doing in the markets. Léon’s staff actively collected information on their competitors in Paris even as they guarded closely the details about their own orders with manufacturers and designers. Léon himself begged visiting American buyers to keep their moves and intentions in Paris “strictly secret” and not to speak to reporters for fear that competitors might pick up hints and “spoil our operations.” Clerks in the Paris office fielded calls for information from competing American buyers posing as tourists and French buyers sometimes discovered that even trusted visitors working on behalf of AMC member stores were sharing information with competitors. When the AMC’s Bamberger’s of Newark sent Tobe Coller, an independent American fashion “stylist” (and most likely a haute couture copyist) to the Paris office, Léon’s French buyers discovered that she was also sharing information with Jordan Marsh, a local competitor to Filene’s and a member of the Allied Purchasing Co. in Paris. “Give her no information

except that authorized by Bambergers,” Kirstein wired immediately when he learned of Coller’s dual loyalties.\textsuperscript{278} Competition grew so tense that when the Associated Dress Manufacturers of America proposed a foreign branch to manage and systematize the Paris fashion trade for American importing firms (in fact, a thinly veiled plan to reduce competition from group buying and cheap Paris copies) one of the top benefits listed for members was: “to allow the world renown resident buyers of Paris—the Gimbel Group, Macy’s, the AMC, Lord & Taylor, Wanamaker, and Marshall Field’s—to share information like personal friends.” The proposal was quickly dismissed.\textsuperscript{279}

Although the exclusivity of \textit{haute couture} set the pace and culture of the Paris fashion trade, very little of the AMC’s business went to these high-end fashion houses. Much to the chagrin of both the couturiers and the French buyers at the AMC Paris office, the symbolic importance of \textit{haute couture} in the American retail industry vastly outweighed the sums of money American buyers spent on original designs. Léon had been repeatedly embarrassed by the tight wallets of the AMC’s visiting American buyers at the French dress openings and reported that the business managers of several couture houses “assailed” him personally for condoning their actions. In response, French merchandise managers at the AMC office developed a new orientation for visiting dress buyers, which emphasized the idea that “going to the opening in most cases means buying at least one dress per store represented.” Despite these efforts on the part of

\textsuperscript{278} EL to LEK, October 28, December 27, 1926, “Leon 1923-26”; EL to LEK, August 9, December 23, 1927, “Leon 1927-1928,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{279} Mr. de Giaffori, “The National Chamber of the Dress Industry, Explanatory Plan of Action,” October 1927; LEK to EL, December 5, 1927, “Leon 1927-1928,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
merchandise managers to impress upon visiting American buyers the importance of buying rather than studying (and later copying) models, the practice continued. Of the eleven AMC buyers who attended the fall opening for Premet in 1927, only one purchased a single sample. Premet’s business manager subsequently issued a warning to Léon that such conduct could result in a ban on AMC buyers from future openings. Léon considered “the prestige of the AMC and its future in the style field at stake” if Premet took such actions and accordingly demanded that all American dress buyers consider the purchase of at least one dress model as an admission fee to attend any couture opening. He even forced several of eleven buyers to return to Premet and buy samples after the fact. From his office at Filene’s in Boston, Kirstein opposed Léon’s approach to haute couture and reminded him that the “high class model houses” comprised an “infinitesimally small part of our business.” “In my humble opinion,” he continued, “they are good for advertising purposes only.” Kirstein defended, even championed the rights of American buyers not to purchase samples they believed might be unprofitable. Eventually Kirstein assuaged Léon’s frustrations by conceding that there were “two sides to every story.” 280 Indeed, there were two sides to every story, and there were two sides to the AMC Paris office, too: one French and one American.

Situated in the heart of the commissionaire district at 5 Cité Paradis, on the same block as the trade offices of Macy’s and Lord & Taylor, the AMC Paris headquarters was one of the fastest growing and busiest trade offices in the city. The headquarters

280 Correspondence between EL and LEK, December 23, 1927, January 6, 24, February 18, 1928, “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
underwent two renovations for expansion in 1922 and 1927 and ultimately fully occupied a five story building plus an annex devoted to packing and shipping. Unlike the AMC offices in London and Berlin, which relied on local manufacturers to pack and ship orders, in Paris no article left the country without first being inspected by several of the nearly three dozen French buyers, clerks, and advisors that staffed the office year round. When visiting American buyers arrived at the office they passed through a first floor devoted to the display of current merchandise samples selected by the French buying staff to highlight the best work of local manufacturers. Sales representatives from these firms regularly visited the first floor of the office to attract American business. Individual sample rooms reserved for each AMC member store populated the upper floors and each one featured long high tables and the best in modern lighting for the close inspection of merchandise samples. When American buyers visited the office, Léon paired them with resident French buyers who had experience dealing with manufacturers in their lines. The office also retained a cadre of French fashion experts and stylists, such as Madame Odette or Mademoiselle Marihart, who sent regular fashion reports to

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281 There is no document stating exactly how many people worked in the Paris office. In 1920 *Women’s Wear Daily* reported sixteen people hired at the Paris office. Given that the firm guaranteed resident buyers for all member stores plus the additional clerks and style advisors, it is reasonable to think that more than three dozen staff worked in the office by the end of the decade. See: “Scheidecker Here to Visit Stores of AMC Group,” *WWD*, September 27, 1920, 1, 30. Also see: FJS to Rothschild, letter, July 9, 1923, “Scheidecker 1924-27,” Box 80, LEK HBL.

282 LEK to EL, letter, November 17, 1927, EL to LEK, letter, December 5, 1927 “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.


284 EL to LEK, letter, October 22, 1926, “Leon 1923-1926,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
New York and advised American buyers in all lines on their trips to Paris. During the *haute couture* seasonal openings in the spring and fall, the office hosted as many as two dozen visiting American buyers at one time, along with a handful of AMC member executives, most of whom visited the office once each year. “I must say that the office is busy morning, afternoon, evening, and Sundays,” Léon reported during the fall openings in 1926. Although some of the AMC executives initially complained that the Paris headquarters was not equipped to handle so many buyers at once, the office only got more crowded as the decade wore on and a second round of expansion in 1927 was unavoidable.

In the harried climate of the AMC Paris office, the resident French staff always played the part of hosts to their visiting American colleagues. Despite the fact that the AMC was an American corporation, the office was run almost exclusively by the French (Scheidecker was Swiss). In a sense, the office mirrored the city around it in which American visitors had made themselves a commanding and conspicuous presence on French soil. As many as four hundred thousand Americans made a trip to Paris in 1925, and by their sheer numbers, these tourists fueled the remaking of parts of the city, such as the place de l’Opéra, which came to feature American saloons and institutions like Harry’s New York Bar. Despite the enthusiasm and excitement Americans felt over interwar Paris, the French were not always eager to play host. Many resented the

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285 LEK to FJS, letter, March 12, 1925; FJS to LEK, letter, March 26, 1925,” Scheidecker, 1923-26,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
286 EL to LEK, letter, August 4 & 10 1926, “Leon 1923-1926,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
287 A E. Burchfield to LEK, letter, January 25, 1922, “Joseph Horne Co.,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
intrusion of modern American commercialism, buying power, and other values they perceived to be at odds with an idealized vision of the French way of life. At the national level, bitterness over the United States’ reversal on the League of Nations, insistence on war debt repayments, and approval of the Dawes Plan had long since displaced feelings of camaraderie over a shared victory in the First World War.\footnote{288} In fashion circles these resentments were amplified by American buyers who did not follow the customs of the trade, such as buying models at couture openings, and who unapologetically engaged in piracy, thus undercutting an important national industry. The French staff at the AMC office registered their discontent in a number of ways. Between 1926 and 1929, Léon discovered three French employees who were engaged in long-term thefts of the AMC’s profits. An accountant named Paul Kelbert adjusted his recordkeeping in an attempt to cover up the more than forty thousand francs he pocketed over the course of a year, and in the mailroom two clerks worked together to steal and resell stamps totaling more than ten thousand francs.\footnote{289} At no other time and in no other foreign office was the AMC the victim of a single insider theft, let alone three in as many years. By the early 1930s the Paris office earned an unwelcome reputation for fostering these kinds of “irregularities” and Léon was warned by the executive board to monitor his staff closely.\footnote{290} Far more insidious and harmful than these thefts, however, was the ongoing reluctance of the French to speak English in the AMC office.

\footnote{289} Correspondence between Scheidecker, Leon, Kirstein, and Kelbert, February 1928; LEK to FJS, letter, March 12, 1930; FJS to LEK, February 24, 1930, “Scheidecker 1927-31,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
\footnote{290} LEK to EL, letter, April 23, 1932, “Leon 1929-39,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
Paris may have been the epicenter of the American retail trade abroad, but very few American executives and buyers bothered to learn French. A 1921 survey of eighty-seven retailers and hundreds of buyers working at department stores across the United States revealed no consensus as to what kind of training or experience best prepared buyers for their work. Only one respondent, an unnamed college-educated female buyer, insisted on language training. “Study Latin,” she noted, “as the foundation for the other languages used while traveling and buying.” It was good advice, but even in 1927 Léon reported that almost none of the nearly one hundred fifty American buyers who visited the AMC Paris office annually spoke French. When Richard Owen, a drapery buyer for AMC member store J. L. Hudson Co. of Detroit, led his first group buying committee to Europe he lamented that their work was “not so easily done” in Paris as in London. “All of our talking,” he regretted, “had to be done through an interpreter.” In a summary report of his trip Owen pointed out that converting francs into dollars and back again in negotiations with manufacturers, especially given the currency fluctuations of the period, proved much more challenging when done through an interpreter. Because of the language barrier Léon worked carefully to hire French buyers with experience in the United States and enough knowledge of English to interpret for their American colleagues in the Paris markets. “I have an exceedingly good man for gloves,” Léon wrote to Kirstein when he hired Daniel Douillet. “He has spent four years in America, is

292 EL to LEK, December 23, 1927 “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
293 “Report of Mr. R. Owen’s Foreign Trip,” July 29, 1921, “Hudson,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
quite an expert in the line and I feel sure the [American] buyers will like him.” Kirstein was pleased. “I am looking for decided improvement along the language line by the time of my next visit to Paris,” he wrote to Léon in 1927. From the early days of the Paris office Kirstein had insisted that only English be spoken, and from the early days American buyers complained that the French buyers spoke entirely too much French. During the winter of 1927-28 Léon doubled down on the English-only policy in the office and reported that the staff was “gradually taking the habit of talking English.” However, he wrote, sheepishly, “I must say I have to watch them.”

French buyers’ reluctance to speak English did much worse than contribute to a few miscommunications, it bred a level of distrust between AMC buyers, managers, and executives that pitted Americans and French against each other. When the AMC established its first European offices it was fairly commonplace for all buyers, regardless of nationality, to accept extra commissions, gifts, and other bribes from manufacturers in exchange for orders, but the executive board passed a resolution explicitly forbidding this practice at the foreign offices in 1921. Still, American executives and buyers routinely suspected the French of advocating for French manufacturers rather than for AMC member stores in the United States. American buyers complained that they were too often encouraged to entertain sales pitches from manufacturers that did not offer merchandise of the right quantity or quality for their store. Moreover, when French manufacturers

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294 EL to LEK, letter, November 8, 1927, “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
295 EL to LEK, letter, October 18, 1927, LEK to EL, letter, October 26, 1927 “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
296 LEK to Scheidecker, letter, June 29, 1921, “Robins 1921-1931,” Box 77, LEK HBL.
297 Letter from Joseph Horne Co. to Scheidecker, January 25, 1922, “Joseph Horne Co.,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
refused to make modifications on samples, American buyers attributed their refusal to the French buyers’ unwillingness to advocate effectively for American, rather than French business interests. As often as Léon explained that French manufacturers did not accept modification requests along the same lines as American manufacturers, visiting American buyers and executives alike continued to question the loyalties of their French colleagues.\textsuperscript{298} When J. B. Shea of the AMC member store Joseph Horne Co. of Pittsburgh found that a shipment of French mufflers did not meet his expectations he reported that the Paris office “seemed to be more interested in finding excuses for their manufacturers than anything else.” Another buyer from the same firm further suggested that an American stylist would be a more effective advocate than the French buyer working in that line.\textsuperscript{299} In 1927 Kirstein undertook an informal survey of American buyers visiting the Paris office and concluded there was widespread belief that the office was to “a great extent representing the manufacturers and securing the best they can for them rather than representing the stores.” American buyers, he reported to Léon, arrived in Paris “with fear and trembling… that if they do not buy sufficiently large quantities to meet the views of the foreign office people, that they will be looked upon as pikers and made to feel so.”\textsuperscript{300} Kirstein explained that the continued use of French played a significant role in these suspicions and fears because the American buyers could not follow communications between French buyers, manufacturers, and designers. “This is why,”

\textsuperscript{298} EL to LEK, December 27, 1927, “Leon 1927-28,” LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{299} J.B. Shea to LEK, letter, January 22, 1925; FJS to LEK, letter, January 6, 1925, “Joseph Horne Co.” Box 82, LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{300} LEK to EL, letter, December 8, 1927 “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
Kirstein wrote, “I have always insisted that the English language shall be spoken.” Alas, French language training for American buyers who worked regularly in the Paris markets was never considered as a solution.\(^{301}\)

Insisting on an English language policy in the AMC office, however, could not change the fact that the highly competitive interwar Paris fashion trade was conducted in the French language and more or less on French terms, no matter how important the U.S. export market had become. Unlike the business and sales managers working for German manufacturers who willingly spoke English, accepted English language business orders, and produced invoices written in English, French manufacturers spoke and worked only in French. They produced French language invoices and would not do so in triplicate as did German, British, and American manufacturers. Despite requests from AMC executives for English invoices in triplicate the Paris office never managed to produce them.\(^{302}\) As the AMC executive board increasingly insisted that all the foreign offices follow the same policies and procedures they selected the London office as the administrative model to follow, not the larger and more influential Paris office.\(^{303}\) “As in administration office,” Kirstein wrote of the London staff in 1926, “they are almost perfect, though the merchandise side of it is lamentably weak.”\(^{304}\) In Paris, the merchandise was the strongest in the world, though relations between American and French in the AMC office remained “lamentably weak.” In 1928 Léon took great pains to

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\(^{301}\) LEK to EL, January 6, 1928, “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.

\(^{302}\) Rothschild to FJS, letter June 19, 1926, Scheidecker to Rothschild, letter, July 9, 1923, “Scheidecker 1924-27,” Box 80, LEK HBL.

\(^{303}\) Emphasis mine. “Minutes of Meeting Held by Foreign Office Managers in Brussels,” July 11-12, 1927; FJS to LEK, letter, July 19, 1927, “Scheidecker, 1927-31” Box 80, LEK HBL.

\(^{304}\) LEK to FJS, July 8, 1926, “Scheidecker 1924-27,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
impress upon his French buyers the fact that they were paid based not on the volume of sales they produced, but rather on the quality of service they provided to American buyers; they were not under any circumstances to consider themselves as salespeople for French manufacturers. “I am having the people here gradually realize that they are part of an American organization,” Léon reported to Kirstein, “and as such should enter into the spirit of the American organization as much as possible while handling problems between American buyers and French manufacturers.”

Léon’s initiative came at the height of the AMC’s expansion across Europe and when the realization of the “American spirit” at the Paris office seemed plausible, albeit unlikely. Two years later, however, in the throes of a worldwide depression, AMC executives were less concerned about the American spirit than they were about maintaining a bottom line.

A “Policy of Retrenchment” Across Europe

Despite the tensions that preoccupied the AMC office in Paris, purchases continued to increase in France and throughout Europe. In 1926 the New York Times reported that the AMC was doing the largest volume of business of any retail group anywhere in the world, totaling more than three hundred million dollars annually. The following year the number of orders placed by American buyers at the Paris office increased thirty percent. By 1928 the corporation had opened additional offices in

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305 EL to LEK, letter, January 24, 1928, “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
307 EL to LEK, letter, July 25, 1927, “Leon 1927-28,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
Belfast (1923), Brussels (1924), Zurich (1926), and Chenmitz (1926), and secured satellite representation in Vienna, Gablonz, and Milan. In January 1929 the AMC opened a second Paris bureau designed to serve American tourists and expatriates in the city, particularly those who patronized AMC member stores back home. Situated just around the corner from the fashionable shopping district on the Rue de la Paix and across from Harry’s New York Bar, the new bureau, which they named “Service Aimcee,” featured fashionable writing and rest rooms and lounges, and a broad array of services, from the travel, mail, and telephone departments to the popular personal service department, where research assistants fielded all manner of questions and requests. These ranged from the bizarre, such as where to buy carrier pigeons, to the herculean, such as setting up a home for Americans in Paris complete with a governess and primary school recommendations. The AMC executive board hoped the Service Aimcee would alleviate some of the pressure on the Paris office staff to welcome the ever-increasing number of American tourists and expatriates seeking advice about where to shop and what to buy. Alas, despite the overwhelming success of the Service Aimcee in 1929, its rest rooms and lounges were empty by the middle of 1930. “It has been very quiet indeed as we have only an occasional traveler to cheer on her way through,” reported

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310 P.J. Reilly to AMC Executive Board, “Paris Office for Personal Service to Customers,” June 22, 1928; EL to P.J. Reilly, report & letter, February 17, 1930, “Service Aimcee,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
Madam de Wardener, the French manager of the ill-fated Paris service bureau. By then, the AMC executive board had already begun negotiations to sell the property.311 In July 1930 the managers of all the foreign offices gathered in Paris to meet with Kirstein and Philip J. Reilly, who had only recently assumed the directorship of the AMC. “The time has come,” Kirstein explained, “for two men to do the jobs of three.” The group discussed several strategies for adjusting to poor business conditions including: reducing budgets, seeking contracts to buy merchandise for stores located outside the United States, and becoming more “internationally minded.”312 This final point was key. During the height of the AMC’s expansion across Europe in the middle twenties, the foreign offices increasingly focused more or less on markets bound by national borders. That is to say, the Paris office focused on French markets while the Zurich office took over buying in Swiss markets, and so on. By 1932, however, the AMC closed or severely curtailed its foreign representation at all but the offices in Paris, London, Berlin, and Vienna. This “policy of retrenchment” expanded the work of the remaining AMC foreign offices back across national borders.313 Staff at the London office began processing orders for merchandise sourced in markets throughout the United Kingdom, and staff at the Paris office took over both the Swiss and Italian markets. After 1932 the AMC executive board consolidated operations in Berlin and Vienna and placed all markets in Central Europe under the direction of a single manager who split his time

311 M. de Wardener to LEK, letter, November 14, 1930; P.J. Reilly to Leon, letter, September 17, 1931; J. Stanton Robbins to P.J. Reilly, letter, April 27, 1932, “Service Aimcee,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
312 Minutes of European Office Managers Meeting, July 28 & 29, 1930, “Paris Meetings,” Box 79, LEK HBL.
between the two capital cities. With the exception of the new office in Vienna, the onset of the Great Depression thrust the AMC back to the same foreign office configuration with which it began the decade: regional trade offices in Paris, London, and Berlin. Yet, while the retrenchment policy allowed the AMC to continue its foreign operations at a time when few Americans could afford to buy imports, the regional configuration of the Berlin office in particular would also bring a host of unforeseen problems after the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in 1933.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Anti-Nazi Boycotts and the American Craze for Alpine Fashions
How Fascism Changed the U.S. Retail Trade in Central Europe after 1933

Introduction

In mid-July 1934 a squad of six Anti-Nazi Minutemen, dressed in their blue and gold overseas caps, gathered outside the grand entrance of Macy’s department store in New York City’s Herald Square. The Minutemen distributed circulars bearing the headline: “Buy American, Boycott Nazi Goods.” Underneath the headline were copies of ship manifests proving that Macy’s had imported forty-seven bundles of baskets and sixteen cases of crockery and woodenware from Hamburg, Germany on June 14. The demonstration was peaceful, and, as the Jewish Telegraphic Agency noted, had little effect on the number of people entering the store. Several days later the Vice President of Macy’s, Edwin Marks, released an official response to the Anti-Nazi Minute Men, whom he described as careless and irresponsible. “It so happens that every dollar’s worth of this shipment only came from Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Poland,” Marks explained. He pointed out that the shipment was conducted through Hamburg because it was the only port available to transport goods from “interior countries.” Joseph Rosen, chairman of the boycott committee for the Anti-Nazi Minutemen, publicly accepted Marks’ explanation in the pages of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, but cited another German purchase for
Marks to refute: thirteen cases of sweets consigned to Macy’s that arrived on the S.S. 
_Deutschland_ from Bremen, Germany on July 7. It had been several months since the 
Macy’s firm announced that they would close their trade office in Berlin and stop selling 
German merchandise. As the largest department store in New York City, Macy’s 
compliance with the anti-Nazi boycott seemed to represent a major victory for the 
movement. Indeed, the rise of the Nazis in Germany would alter the course of the 
American retail trade in the mid-thirties, although not in the way that Rosen and legions 
of boycott proponents intended.\(^{314}\)

Only a handful of scholars have written about the anti-Nazi boycotts that erupted 
in March 1933 and all have focused on the conflicts between leading American Jewish 
organizations about how to respond to the movement.\(^{315}\) Although these studies offer 
detailed descriptions of how major American Jewish organizations developed and 
modified their positions on the boycott, none considers what the movement looked like 
from the perspective of importers and retailers who were directly involved in the German

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\(^{314}\) “Charge Macy’s with Buying of Nazi Products,” _Jewish Telegraphic Agency_, July 20, 1934; “Macy’s 
_Jewish Telegraphic Agency_, July 29, 1934; “The Most Exciting Furniture Sale Since Men First Sat On 

\(^{315}\) The most relevant of these sources is Moshe Gottlieb’s 1973 article in _Jewish Social Studies_. Two 
popular surveys of Jewish history also address the boycott. In _A Time for Searching: Entering the 
Mainstream_, Henry Feingold writes several paragraphs about debates over the boycott in order to highlight 
the “organizational disarray within the Jewish community” on the eve of the Holocaust. In _Jews of the 
United States, 1654-2000_, Hasia Diner casts the organizational conflicts in a less critical light by citing the 
boycott as just one of many different responses to the crisis in Europe. See: Moshe Gottlieb, “The Anti-
Nazi Boycott Movement in the United States: An Ideological and Sociological Appreciation,” _Jewish 
Social Studies_, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1973), 201; William Orbach, “Shattering the Shackles of Powerlessness: 
The Debate Surrounding the Anti-Nazi Boycott of 1933-41,” _Modern Judaism_, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1982), 149-
169; Henry L. Feingold, _A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945_ (Baltimore: The Johns 
Hopkins University Press, 1992); Hasia Diner, _Jews of the United States, 1654-2000_ (University of 
California Press, 2006); Note that there is no mention of the boycotts in surveys that are more focused on 
trade. Nor, has any study considered the impact the boycotts had on American consumer practices as Nazism continued to spread across Europe after 1933. Lawrence Glickman refers to the anti-Nazi boycotts in *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*, but only as a small point of comparison to the far more successful anti-silk boycott that followed Japan’s war against China in 1937. As Glickman argues, the anti-silk boycott was one of the most popular consumer campaigns in American history largely because proponents successfully linked Japanese militarism to the consumption of a single, popular, and highly visible product: women’s stockings.\footnote{Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 225.}

By point of contrast, the Anti-Nazi Minutemen criticized Macy’s for importing a disparate array of German-made consumer goods, all of which were generally invisible to the public. Baskets, crockery, and sweets were not paraded in the streets as women’s stockings were, but rather packaged and carried home. Indeed, by 1930 German wares were so diffused across American stores that they could be found in dozens of merchandise lines. For example, a flyer produced by the Joint Boycott Council (JBC), one of the largest organizations supporting the anti-Nazi boycott, demanded consumers avoid purchasing nearly two dozen broadly conceived “types” of goods that were “possibly” German and ranged from cheap printed cloth and housewares to wine and optical products.\footnote{“Americans! Americans!,” flyer, n.d., Box I, Joint Boycott Council Records, New York Public Library [hereafter JBC NYPL].} While Glickman is right to point out that the anti-Nazi boycott was less successful than the anti-silk boycott, the comparison is hardly a fair one. German merchandise was not only a
much, much more expansive category, it also funneled through Berlin, a trade hub that was vital to American retail networks across Europe.

Few American retailers were convinced that the boycott movement was the right response to Adolf Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. A great many preferred—and some even helped to draft—anti-boycott policies, and more still championed the free-trade policies of the Roosevelt Administration. When it was profitable to do so, many continued to buy, process, and ship merchandise through Berlin, in some cases right up until Germany’s declaration of war against the United States in 1941. Even so, most stopped selling German merchandise in their stores in March 1934. In New York City, the uncontested center of both American Jewish life and the American retail trade, many leading retailers were also prominent American Jews with ties to the elite American Jewish Committee (AJCOMM). Boycott proponents targeted these stores, from Macy’s to Bloomingdale’s, because their compliance promised an important victory both within Jewish circles and the commercial sphere. When, in the spring of 1934, nearly every major store in New York City renounced ties to Berlin and agreed to take German merchandise off their shelves, boycott leaders considered it a triumph, and, in a sense, it was. Most stores cited growing consumer resistance as the reason why they threw their support behind the boycott, but the truth was more complicated. The anti-Nazi boycotts erupted during the worst years of the Great Depression, at a time when sales of all foreign imports had already plummeted to record lows and when many Americans fell under the sway of

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318 Most of these goods, however, were shipped to consumers living in the middle and western United States, or in Britain, Canada, or Australia.
William Randolph Hearst’s viciously nativist, but wildly popular “buy American” campaign. As a result, German merchandise accounted for less than one percent of total stocks at many large department stores by the spring of 1934, a fact that made boycott compliance an easy, almost de facto, business decision, rather than a political statement.

More important, the absence of German made merchandise in some of the country’s most influential department stores in the United States did not prevent the sale of fashions from other regions of Central Europe where popular politics consistent with Nazi attitudes towards Jews and modernity also reigned. Although many American consumers had grown wary of German political conditions, few seemed to harbor concerns about neighboring Austria. When a new authoritarian government took hold of the country in 1934, rightwing officials ensured not only that Vienna would become the new center of trade in Central Europe, but also that Austrian exports would express a specific, even somewhat fascist vision for the country’s future. Most Austrian exports to the United States in the mid-thirties idealized the country’s poorest, most conservative, and predominantly Catholic Alpine provinces. They, in turn, also projected a national image that excluded the modern and predominantly Jewish culture of “Red Vienna”—and Americans loved it. Just as Paris fashions symbolized American women’s desire to associate with an imagined world class of privileged and wealthy women, the rise of Alpine fashions captured Americans’ desire to be part of an idealized world that looked
Christian, timeless, and beautiful. The fact that the vision was a fiction, or that most of the manufacturers who produced the styles were Viennese Jews mattered little.

Retailers did all they could to stoke and capitalize on this interest in Alpine, or what came to be called “Tyrolean” fashions. Wanamaker’s of New York installed an eighty-foot ski-slide and constructed a replica of an Alpine village in its flagship store, and dozens of retailers across the country began hosting Austrian or Swiss ski fashion advisors for regular tutorials in their stores. When the Viennese comedic operetta “White Horse Inn” opened on Broadway in 1936, with its stunning “Tyrolean” stage set and beautiful “folk” donning lederhosen and dirndls, Americans, especially New Yorkers, let out a collective swoon. The American retail trade in Vienna blossomed in the year following the premiere of “White Horse Inn,” with many firms reporting double and triple increases in sales. AMC member stores like Bloomingdale’s, Abraham & Straus, and Filene’s led the way in Alpine fashions and operated one of the most sought-after trade offices in Vienna, alongside Wanamaker’s and Macy’s.

The American craze for Alpine fashions was not a conscious expression of outright support for the Nazi regime, but rather a trend that exposed the broad appeal of an anti-modern, anti-Semitic vision across the United States. Such hateful ideals not only emerged in the obvious places, such as the radio programs of Father Charles Coughlin or the publications of Henry Ford, but were also embedded in the fabric of fashions that Americans encountered everyday inside their own closets, on the pages of their favorite

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fashion magazines, and at their local department stores.\textsuperscript{320} However, by shifting the center of this study from American closets and stores to the retail trade abroad, it becomes clear that fashion trends did not only emerge from consumer demand or the creative minds of designers, but also in accordance with shifts in international trade relations and retailers’ maneuvers within the internal politics of other states.\textsuperscript{321} Berlin and greater Central Europe proved too important to retail trade networks abroad, and subsequently to consumer demands at home to be simply abandoned after 1933. Only when Alpine imagery acquired the “Nazi” label after the \textit{Anschluss} in March 1938 did Americans turn their backs on Tyrolean styles and, in turn, prompt American retailers and importers to look seriously at new markets. With the help of the U.S. Commerce Department, for example, Macy’s led the industry in promoting Latin-American wares that touted an imagined pan-American alliance and purported to sever Europe’s hold on American fashions. Yet as retailers scrambled to extract their business interests not only from Berlin and Vienna, but soon enough from Czechoslovakia, too, they discovered that the depth of their operations in Central Europe made it impossible for them to leave.


\textsuperscript{321} The notion that fashions were political is not new, but typically fashion politics is also considered in the context of self a conscious movement, such as the American Fashions for American Women campaign (see Chapter One) or otherwise attributed to the choices of the designer, see: Valerie Steele, \textit{Paris Fashions: A Cultural History} (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998).
An Empty Victory in New York: American Retailers and the Anti-Nazi Boycott Movement

In July 1935 Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum, prominent member of the American Jewish Congress and soon-to-be-leader of the JBC, observed that, “the American market is flooded with more German goods than ever since the beginning of the boycott.” Although the boycott campaigns had generated tremendous enthusiasm, “especially among the Jewish masses,” he believed they had failed to produce any genuine impact. Tenenbaum argued that outside New York City the campaigns were “totally disorganized” and that an “anti-boycott movement was spreading like wildfire.” Tenenbaum had good reason to be concerned. Two influential American Jewish organizations, the American Jewish Committee (AJCOMM) and B’nai B’rith, remained persistent in their opposition to the boycott for fear that it might inspire Nazi retaliation against Germany’s Jews, and alienate American Jews from their hard-earned alliances in Washington and among American Christians. And even though most major department stores in New York City had stopped selling German merchandise, he knew that compliance with the boycott was not the same as outright support for the movement. During his tenure as the Chairman of the JBC, Tenenbaum developed a special rating system to gauge department stores’ compliance and even organized a committee of women who regularly “shopped” for the purpose of ensuring that German merchandise stayed out of department stores. At no

322 Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum to Samuel Untermeyer, letter, July 2 1935, “Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League, Box 3, JBC NYPL.
323 Tony Sender, Secretary of Women’s Committee of the Joint Boycott Council, form letter, June 5, 1936 in untitled folder, Box 3; “Memorandum from Mr. William Z. Spiegelman to Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum,” March 13, 1934 in untitled folder, Box 17; “Joint Boycott Council Index of Stores,” 1934-1939, no folder, Box 23A, JBC NYPL.
point over the course of the decade did the JBC trust New York City’s retailers to remain compliant with the boycott, and for good reason.

For most leading retailers, compliance with the anti-Nazi boycott movement had less to do with resistance to the Nazi Party than with the combined effects of the Great Depression and a buy national campaign that first captured American consumers’ attention in 1932. A great many retailers became, in a sense, de facto boycotters because German merchandise accounted for such a small percentage of their inventories—in some cases less than one percent. Even at one of the country’s largest firms, Macy’s of New York City, dwindling sales of German imports no longer justified the expense of maintaining a trade office in Berlin. Still, it took more than a year for leading New York retailers to publicly renounce ties to Berlin and take German wares out of their stores. For many retailers, support for the boycott was complicated by their close connections to the AJCOMM and the Democratic Party. Some of the most influential executives subscribed to the anti-boycott platform of the AJCOMM, and a few, namely Kirstein of Filene’s and the AMC, even helped draft that platform. Although consumer resistance to German goods ultimately pushed stores in the American northeast into tacit compliance with the movement, a number of firms, including Bloomingdale’s and Abraham & Straus, stayed connected to the German trade, especially through the AMC office in Berlin. Consumers in the middle United States and in England, Australia, and Canada, remained eager to buy German wares, especially toys, fabric gloves, linens, and china, and the AMC happily
supplied them. Ultimately, New York-based department stores delivered a symbolically important but otherwise meaningless victory for the boycott movement in March 1934. For much of the American retail industry, German markets and ports remained a vital hub for trade through Central Europe, even as goods with “Made in Germany” labels were removed from displays in New York and Boston.

At the start of 1930 the AMC executive board began calling on managers at the foreign offices to cut expenses and seek new contracts with stores outside the United States. At the Vienna office, resident local buyers kept the effects of the depression under control by purchasing large lots of steeply discounted merchandise from Austrian manufacturers that were going out of business. Visiting American buyers representing American and English department stores were eager to pick up the cheap Austrian wares, but trade conditions remained depressed. In 1932, the AMC executive board held a special meeting in New York City to address the “tremendous drop in sales volumes” that

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324 American retailers often described the German-made items listed here as difficult, if not impossible to replace. It is likely that these were the same in the British markets. See (especially): Louis W. Fairchild, “The Big Retail Show in Boston Seen From a Front Seat,” WWD, September 19, 1933, 34; “Reveals Sharp Drop in Macy’s German Purchases but Reich Wares Still on Display in Stores,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, January 16, 1934; More needs to be said about consumers in other countries, especially in England and their steady demand for German wares through the 1930s. One possible explanation is that, as the Executive Director P.J. Reilly explained in 1938, British consumers may not have known that they were buying German goods. According to Reilly: “One advantage the English stores have is that they can have their imported merchandise merely stamped “Imported,” and the country of origin need not be specified. Ordinarily they avoid specifying the country of origin except in the case of French and American merchandise because in these two cases it helps to sell the goods over here.” It may be the case then, that Harrods shoppers were buying German merchandise without realizing it was German. See: PJR to LEK, letter, December 9, 1938, in “Closing Vienna Office,” Box 82, Louis E. Kirstein Papers, Harvard’s Baker Library [hereafter LEK HBL].

325 For most of the 1920s the AMC had contracted with the popular Austrian buying firm of Max Grab, but when Grab died in 1930, the AMC acquired his business and placed one of their own buyers, Austrian native, Hanns Streicher, in charge. See: “Memorandum of points to be covered in subsequent written agreement entered into by Mr. Max Grab and the Associated Merchandising Corporation of New York,” c. 1930; “Passing of Max Grab Leaves Void in Europe’s Trade Circles,” Women’s Wear Daily [hereafter WWD], August 29, 1930; both sources in folder “Vienna Office Grab Death,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
affected all member stores and every foreign trade office. They imposed salary reductions across the corporation and gutted the staff positions and resources at the foreign offices. Even at the AMC’s largest and most important trade office in Paris, expenses were cut twenty percent. Resources allocated to trade offices in Berlin and Vienna were consolidated and the two offices placed under a shared manager, Austrian native and leather goods expert, Hanns Streicher. During his first few weeks in charge, Streicher cut twelve staff positions and imposed ten percent salary reductions on remaining staff in both cities.

Beginning in the fall of 1932, ongoing pressures wrought by the Great Depression helped foster widespread support for a buy national campaign that further undermined demand for imported goods. The British government had launched a massive “Buy British” campaign months earlier that had inspired American media mogul, William Randolph Hearst, owner of dozens of popular magazines and newspapers, to do the same in the United States. Convinced that cheap foreign goods and immigrant laborers were to blame for high unemployment rates, Hearst filled his publications with xenophobic and racist commentaries that urged “true” Americans to “Buy American.” Hearst’s arguments carried a much broader impact than the calls for fashion nationalism that followed the

326 LEK to Mr. Roger Day, letter, May 21, 1932, in “Day 1925-193,” Box 80; PJR to HS, confidential letter, January 29, 1932, in “Hanns Streicher Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
327 HS to PJR, letter, January 5, 1933, in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
328 English tariffs posed an additional problem. In December 1931 Phillip J. Reilly, Executive Director of the AMC, wrote that “the ‘buy British’ campaign, the exchange situation, and the tariff [Import Duties Act 1932] will all have their influences in greatly reducing the volume of their purchases as compared with previous estimates.” See: PJR to Mr. Roger Day, letter, December 23, 1931, “Day 1925-37,” Box 82. HS to LEK,” letters, February 13, 1931; May 7, 1931; June 16, 1931; December 9, 1931; November 3, 1931, in “Hanns Streicher Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL. Also see: “Britain Gives India 10%,” NYT, August 1932, 9.
Payne Aldrich bill and capitalized on the surging nationalist sentiments of the interwar years. Manufacturers, businesses, and labor organizations that stood to benefit from anti-immigration and protective trade policies backed the campaign. By early 1933 the movement had been so influential that President Hoover signed the Buy American Act, which required the federal government to grant preferences to American manufacturers in all its purchases. Alongside the aspirational rhetoric of the campaign, however, consensus emerged across the political spectrum that consumer purchasing power was down 30% due to unemployment, an uptick in part-time work, and wage reductions. Nearly one third of all wage earners were unemployed and another third were underemployed. For those who retained their jobs, wages had fallen sixteen percent. More and more, what little money Americans had to spend was directed towards American made products rather than higher-priced foreign imports.

With the “Buy American” campaign in full swing during the winter of 1932-33, AMC Executive Director P.J. Reilly cautioned Streicher that increasing “propaganda against the purchase of European merchandise” would continue to undermine sales in his

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330 The buy national campaign was not without its critics. The strongest criticism of “buy national” came from the black community in Harlem, which adapted the campaign to redress the high unemployment rates in their own community. The “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign urged a boycott of white-owned stores that refused to hire blacks in white-collar positions. See: Cheryl Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 114-139; For more on the buy national campaign of 1932-33, see: Dana Frank, *Buy American*, 56-78. For an example of a popular buy national article, see: Samuel G. Blythe, “Buy American,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 3, 1932, 3-5, 57-58, 60. Blythe’s article underscores how influential Hearst’s campaign was because the media mogul did not own the *Saturday Evening Post*.

region. In addition to representing more than twenty American member stores,
Streicher’s biggest client was Harrods of London, where “buy national” also threatened
sales. But Streicher was quick to settle new contracts to represent four smaller British
department stores connected to Harrods, and four major Australian department stores in
hopes that their purchases would, as he explained to Reilly, “make up for the reduced
volume of purchases from our American stores.” 332 Indeed, Streicher’s talent for securing
contracts with stores outside the United States at the height of the depression and the
“buy national” campaigns kept the AMC’s trade offices in Berlin and Vienna operational.

When the first calls for a nationwide anti-Nazi boycott came in mid-March 1933,
purchases in Germany were already at record lows across the American retail industry.
Early in the month Women’s Wear Daily announced that American attendance at the
annual Leipzig Fair was “negligible” compared to previous years. One major U.S. retail
combination that had sent more than a dozen buyers to the fair in 1932 sent only two in
1933. German manufacturers were outraged and blamed the “Buy American” campaign
for decreased sales in the United States. One manufacturing firm specializing in mid-
priced handbags reported that American purchases of certain models were eighty percent
less than expected. 333 Two weeks after the opening of the disappointing Leipzig Fair,
William W. Cohen, a leading representative of the Jewish War Veterans of the United
States, announced the first call for a nationwide boycott of Nazi goods. Since the

332 HS to PJR, letters, July 26, 1932; Sept 30, 1932; January 5, 1933; in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK
HBL; PJR to HS, letter, December 31, 1932 in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
333 Fear over the effects of the “Buy American” campaign rattled French manufacturers, too. See: “Leipzig
Report U.S. Interest Light,” WWD, March 6, 1933, 2; “Fear Increases Over Buy American Effect,” WWD,
January 4, 1933.
sweeping Nazi Party victories in German federal elections earlier that month, Americans had been reading news reports recounting violent attacks against German Jews and their businesses. “I doubt that the American government can officially take notice of what the German government is doing to its own citizens,” Cohen explained to the New York Times, “our only line of resistance is to touch German pocketbooks.” More than twenty thousand people attended a widely publicized boycott rally at Madison Square Garden on March 27, and tens of thousands more listened to a live broadcast of the event. The rally featured a powerful line up of speakers, including the President of the American Federation of Labor, Senator Robert F. Wagner, former Governor Alfred E. Smith of New York, and several prominent Catholic Bishops. Over the next few weeks calls for anti-Nazi boycotts made headlines in Britain, France, Greece, Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey. 

Despite such widespread enthusiasm for the boycott in March 1933 and early reports that some retailers were canceling their German orders, executives at New York’s leading department stores took no official position on the boycott until September. Instead many retailers spent that time concerned over the development of regulatory

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codes designed to bring the retail industry in line with the goals of the National Recovery Act (NRA). Louis Kirstein of Filene’s and the AMC spent the summer months in Washington, DC developing a massive and controversial publicity drive—known to many as the Blue Eagle campaign—that would cajole retailers into raising wages and lowering prices in accordance with new NRA retail codes. However, at the popular annual Boston Conference on Retail Distribution, Ira Hirschmann, a young and Jewish advertising director at Lord & Taylor who had recently traveled to Europe, gave an impassioned speech that suggested retail executives were not just preoccupied, but altogether avoiding any discussion of the boycott. Hirschmann explained how he had left for Europe as a pacifist, but after witnessing a Nazi Party political rally he “returned fighting mad.” He sharply criticized retailers for continuing to discuss the German “problem” only in “hushed tones,” and challenged American manufacturers to begin offering replacements for the German toys, gloves, linens, china, and novelties that many considered irreplaceable. “Let’s not pass by the problem that exists in trying to revive ourselves,” he challenged retail industry leaders. Hirschmann alleged that retailers’ preoccupation with economic recovery, which had come at the expense of any formal acknowledgment of Nazi violence in Germany. However, retailers’ silence was not only a

336 “Urges Low Prices,” WWD, January 18, 1933, 1; “Strike While Iron is Hot is Kirstein Plea,” WWD, August 17, 1933, 13; “Eight Advisors to Act in Retail Code Hearing,” WWD, August 18, 1933, 1. Also see Jacobs, Pocketbook Politics, 111-122.
338 See Hirschmann, Caution to the Winds, 41-45. Actually, Hirschmann seems to have attended Hitler’s meeting in August 1932, but his fears about Germany’s future were raised again during his visit in 1933.
339 Louis W. Fairchild, “The Big Retail Show in Boston As Seen From the Front Seat,” WWD, September 19, 1933, 34.
matter of preoccupation or avoidance. For many, it was also a carefully considered anti-boycott position first articulated by the most influential Jewish organization in the country.

At no point in the 1930s was there any consensus among leading American Jewish organizations about how to respond to the anti-Nazi boycott movement. From the beginning, the American Jewish Committee (AJCOMM), which represented the wealthiest stratum of American Jews with roots in the German Jewish migration of the nineteenth century, opposed the rally at Madison Square Garden for fear of further Nazi retaliation against German Jews.340 Their fears were realized when Nazi Party officials threatened a National Boycott Day directed at German Jewish business owners unless the rally was canceled—it wasn’t. On April 1 Nazi “brown shirts” splashed Jewish storefronts with yellow and black paint spelling out “quarantined,” and picketers thronged commercial thoroughfares throughout Germany.341 In June the executive board of the AJCOMM released a statement declaring that they “definitively and unequivocally

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341 National Boycott Day was neither the beginning nor the end of Nazi harassment of Jewish business owners. In early March a foreign correspondent for Women’s Wear Daily reported harassment from armed Nazi youths as he attempted to enter Wertheim’s, a popular Jewish-owned department store in Berlin. American businessman F. W. Woolworth was forced to temporarily close his popular dime store locations throughout Germany when newspapers reported that he was Jewish. In the weeks following National Boycott Day many retailers began placing “Pure German” signs in their windows and Nazis implemented the first program to “nationalize” (Aryanize) a Jewish retailer. The nationalization process continued until there were no Jewish business owners in the Third Reich. See: Simone Ladwig Winters, “The Attack on German Department Stores After 1933” in Probing the Depths of German Anti-Semitism in German Society and the Persecution of the Jews, 1933-1941, edited by David Bankier, (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and the Leo Baeck Institution, 2000); Also see “Nazi Boycott Ends But Some Efforts Remain,” WWD, April 5, 1933, 1; “Germans May Nationalize Jewish Business,” WWD, April 4, 1933, 1; “German Jewish Business Seen Facing Ruin by Boycott,” WWD, March 29, 1933, 1; “Terrorism Makes German Public Shun Nazi Stores,” WWD, March 23, 1933, 1.
disapproved” of the boycott.\textsuperscript{342} The AJCOMM argued that any interference with the German trade would not only worsen conditions for German Jews, it would also hamper economic recovery, alienate Jews from potential allies in the Christian community, and interfere with the free trade priorities of the Roosevelt Administration. Morris Waldman, President of the AJCOMM, characterized the movement as both “futile” and “possibly dangerous,” and insisted that their position was consistent with Jewish elites in Germany, such as Oskar Wasserman, director of the Deutsche Bank.\textsuperscript{343} Broadly speaking, the position of the AJCOMM reflected the concerns of many Jewish elites in the United States who believed that an anti-Nazi boycott would damage the very things that promised a better overall strategy for combating Nazism: hard-won political and non-sectarian alliances, and a path towards global economic recovery.

Without a doubt the AJCOMM’s position on the boycott influenced retail executives in New York, many of which had ties to the organization, or to the Roosevelt Administration, or both. During the 1930s Kirstein in particular was a giant in the American retail industry. In addition to his positions as Vice President of Filene’s and Founder and Chairman of the AMC, he also served on the executive boards of two additional New York department stores: Bloomingdale’s and Abraham & Straus. Moreover, when the AJCOMM developed its position on the boycott Kirstein was also serving one of his many terms as Vice President of the organization’s executive board. Several other influential retailers representing firms outside New York served on the


\textsuperscript{343} Gottlieb, 206-208; Feingold, 235-36.
executive committee of the AJCOMM in 1933, too, including F&R Lazarus of Columbus, Ohio, Bambergers of Newark, New Jersey, and the national chain, Sears, Roebuck & Co.\textsuperscript{344} Conspicuously absent from the AJCOMM’s membership rolls, however, were any sons of Isidor Straus, who had run Macy’s for three decades prior to his death in 1912. Although the first generation of Straus brothers (Isidor, Nathan, and Oscar) had been among the founding members of the AJCOMM, there is no evidence that the second generation at the helm of R. H. Macy’s, Jesse Isidor Straus and Percy Straus (sons of Isidor), maintained their father’s historic ties to the organization.\textsuperscript{345} However, both kept up their father’s close connections to the Democratic Party. Jesse Isidor Straus, who ran the Macy’s firm from 1919 to 1933 cultivated an enduring relationship with New York’s governor, Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1932 Jesse Isidor established a nationwide network of businessmen who fundraised and advocated on behalf of Roosevelt’s presidential campaign, and in March 1933 the grateful incoming president appointed him Ambassador to France. When the first calls for an anti-Nazi boycott erupted, Jesse Isidor was preparing to leave for Paris and his younger brother Percy was transitioning into his new role as President of R.H. Macy’s. Given Percy’s close ties to the State Department through his brother, and his family’s historic ties to the

\textsuperscript{344} See Annual Report of the American Jewish Committee, vol. 36 (1933).
AJCOMM (at least two of Percy’s relations remained very active in the AJCOMM), there was little chance the R. H. Macy’s firm would endorse the anti-Nazi boycott.\footnote{For some biographical details on Jesse Isidor Straus and Percy Straus, see “Jesse Isidor Straus Dies of Pneumonia at Age 64,” \textit{NYT}, October 5, 1936, 1; “Percy Straus, 67, Dies in Home Here,” \textit{NYT}, April 8, 1944, 13; For sources on Jesse Isidor Straus, his appointment, and relationship with Franklin D. Roosevelt, see: “Political Articles, Head of State Relief Fund, 1912-32,” in Folder 4, and “Political Articles, Ambassador to France, 1932-36,” 3 folders, in Jesse Isidor Straus Political & Business Papers, Straus Historical Society; Hugh Grant Straus, son of Nathan Straus, and Roger W. Straus, Jr. grandson of Oscar Straus, were both active in the AJCOMM throughout the 1930s. See \textit{American Jewish Yearbook}.}

In September 1933 the influential attorney Samuel Untermyer emerged as the primary leader of the movement and he brought the boycott question to the feet of New York City’s influential and predominantly Jewish retailers. As a former Vice President of the American Jewish Congress (AJCONG), President of the American League for the Defense of Jewish Rights, and the foremost legal critic of Wall Street and money trusts, Untermyer was a force to be reckoned with. By nearly every measure he ought to have been a member of the AJCOMM: he had German Jewish roots, had attended Columbia Law School, made millions as an attorney, and commanded the respect of many many for his impressive legal work.\footnote{Untermyer soon requested that the American League for the Defense of Jewish Rights be given the “less Jewish” name: Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights. Also, in important ways, Untermyer’s rise to wealth and prominence mirrored that of Isidor Straus, patriarch of the Straus family—both were the sons of German Jewish immigrants who came of age in the South during the Civil War and built their fortunes in New York during the era of Reconstruction. See Gottlieb, “The Anti-Nazi Boycott Movement,” 206-208; Feingold, \textit{Entering the Mainstream}, 235-36; “Untermeyer Dead in his 82\textsuperscript{nd} Year,” \textit{NYT}, March 17, 1940, 1; for more biographical details on Isidor Straus, see fn 27.} Yet Untermyer preferred the pluralism of the AJCONG, which embraced multiple forms of Zionism and applauded cultural and ethnic differences among American Jews.\footnote{Henry Feingold explains the difference between the AJCOMM and the AJCONG as “rooted in differing class backgrounds and patterns of acculturation that may for convenience be classified along the familiar ‘downtown/uptown axis.’” See Feingold, 234-46; for a more detailed explanation of Feingold’s downtown/uptown analysis, see, 158-160. Also see Marc Dollinger, \textit{Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America} (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000), 41-60. Untermeyer’s successor as President of the AJCONG}
supported the boycott movement from the beginning and pledged his resources to
Untermeyer after a personal letter he wrote to German President Hindenberg asking for
relief on behalf of the German Jewry was opened and returned to him with no reply.349
With the full support of the AJCONG, Untermeyer organized a dinner at the Hotel Astor
for over 250 boycott supporters who committed to raising $500,000 in order to
“prosecute the boycott [nationwide] with all possible vigor.” The group voted to establish
an information bureau in order to research replacements for German merchandise, and
planned another committee to develop circulars, placards, radio talks, and films devoted
to the boycott.350 Almost immediately, Untermeyer wrote to executives at New York’s
leading department stores demanding that they, too, join the boycott movement.

One week after Untermeyer’s dinner at the Hotel Astor, on September 19, 1933,
the New York Times printed the first official statement on the boycott from the Secretary
of the National Retail Dry Goods Association (NRDGA). Secretary Nelson spoke on
behalf of twenty leading New York department stores including Lord & Taylor, R. H.
Macy’s, Bloomingdale Brothers, Abraham & Straus, and Wanamaker’s. Nelson began by
explaining that the anti-Nazi boycotts had become so extensive that German imports were
down fifty to eighty percent across the industry. All twenty stores reported that German
wares accounted for “much less than one percent” of their current stocks. Though much
of that decline occurred before the first calls for a boycott emerged in March, Nelson
credited pro-boycott consumers for keeping those figures so low. However, Nelson

349 Gottlieb, 213-215.
350 “$500,000 Sought for Nazi Boycott,” NYT, September 11, 1933, 8.
further explained: “Although the [retail executives] abhor the political and religious persecution in Germany today, they feel that a boycott by the stores would set a dangerous precedent.”\textsuperscript{351} Nelson did not clarify exactly what kind of “dangerous precedent” the executives’ support of the boycott would set, but Untermeyer knew. So too, would anyone following the progress of the boycott movement in 1933. Just as AJCOMM officeholders had articulated in their own anti-boycott policy, the retailers’ statement suggested that deliberate interference with the German retail trade could have “dangerous” consequences for Germany’s Jews, global economic recovery, and non-sectarian or political alliances for the American Jewish community. While several executives who signed the statement had direct ties to the AJCOMM, the firm that really mattered in shaping the decisions of the majority was Macy’s, which was, by far, the largest single department store in New York City.

In the weeks following Nelson’s statement, Percy Straus of Macy’s became embroiled in a public debate with Samuel Untermeyer over the firm’s anti-boycott position. Macy’s had run a full-page advertisement in major New York newspapers in which Straus boldly explained the policy in greater detail and claimed to represent all department stores in the United States. In a personal letter, Straus insisted that although he was a “loyal Jew” who “bitterly resented” Nazi policies, he believed boycott proponents were making misguided decisions based only on their emotions. He boasted that Macy’s buyers stationed in Berlin gave special preferences to German Jewish manufacturers wherever possible and that doing so made “the present unbearable lot of Jews more

\textsuperscript{351} “Demand Off Here for Reich Goods,” \textit{NYT}, September 19, 1933, 12.
presently tolerable.” Kirstein saved in his files a personal copy of the advertisement on which he signed his name and wrote: “This, in my opinion, has what it takes, i.e. namely guts.” The advertisement made Macy’s an important target for Untermeyer, who quickly penned, “An Open Letter to the Advertisement of R. H. Macy and Company,” in which he forcefully dismantled Straus’s logic point by point and concluded that “no self-respecting man or woman of any race or creed” should shop at Macy’s. Three major newspapers, the New York Times, the American, and the Herald Tribune—all of which had longstanding advertising contracts with R. H. Macy’s—refused to print Untermeyer’s letter. The Nation picked it up, however, and dramatized the exchange between Untermeyer and Straus. Under the headline, “The Suppressed Advertisement Concerning R.H. Macy’s,” The Nation offered readers some background on the boycott debates and reprinted Straus’s original advertisement alongside Untermeyer’s rebuttal. The leftist journal further explained that the two leading Jewish figures had continued to correspond privately “without any meeting of the minds.” Straus was offered the final word in The Nation, but Untermeyer’s powerful rebuttal had left him with little to say. The Macy’s president’s only defense was that Untermeyer was “misinformed” about the German trade. He further admitted that the debate was moot because Macy’s would soon become a de facto boycott supporter, anyway: “If present tendencies continue, the small supply of German goods which Macy’s offers will in the course of another year dwindle down to

352 “Three Personal Letters Concerning the Sale of German Goods by Department Store of the United States,” advertisement, NYT, October 31, 1933; “Macy’s Gives Stand on German Products,” WWD, October 2, 1933, 19.
nothing.”354 Although Straus never formally rescinded his firm’s position on the boycott, Untermeyer, the foremost legal critic of Wall Street, clearly had the intellectual upper hand in the debate.

Just a few days after The Nation article hit newsstands, executives at AMC member stores considered a proposal from Hanns Streicher about how to manage their own trade office in Berlin. Like the twenty New York stores represented in Nelson’s statement to the New York Times, American imports from the AMC’s office in Berlin were down 43% during the first six months of 1933. When AMC Executive Director P. J. Reilly first raised the question of closing the Berlin office in September 1933, he considered it alongside the ongoing problem of popular economic nationalism: “The boycott against German merchandise and organized labor’s growing opposition to all imported merchandise,” he argued, “undoubtedly will greatly restrict its sale in [the United States] during the next two or three years.”355 Reilly had asked Hanns Streicher, manager of both the trade offices in Berlin and Vienna, to propose a plan to address the problem. Streicher argued that because most German merchandise was produced not in Berlin, but in Frankfurt, Pforsheim, and Chenmitz, all purchasing could be done from the AMC’s trade office in Vienna or from a possible new outpost in Czechoslovakia. In fact, Streicher calculated that the AMC could cut their expenses in half by moving the center of their trade operations out of Berlin and into Vienna where taxes and labor were

354 “The Suppressed Advertisement Concerning R.H. Macy,” The Nation, October 25, 1933, 479; “Suppressed Ad on Macy’s Stand is Published,” WWD, October 19, 1933, 23; “Untermeyer Advertisement Rejected by Dailies is Published by The Nation,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, October 19, 1933.
355 PJR to LEK, executive memo, September 21, 1933 in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
cheaper. Alas, independent consultants concluded that the AMC’s building in Berlin could only be resold at a significant loss, so Streicher suggested keeping a small staff there to handle consular invoices.\textsuperscript{356} Executives at AMC-affiliated stores unanimously approved Streicher’s plan and, in turn, many announced triumphantly to the press that they had cut ties with Berlin. Michael Schapp, President of Bloomingdale’s, even sent a follow-up telegram asking Streicher to be sure that the firm’s name was removed from any signs posted at the Berlin office.\textsuperscript{357}

AMC executives celebrated Streicher’s plan because it allowed them to tell a growing number of consumers in the United States who were unwilling to buy Nazi merchandise that they would stop selling German wares \textit{without} undermining the corporation’s contracts to represent department stores in England and Australia in Berlin. In late October 1933, Kirstein reluctantly informed Streicher that: “It is a fact that the antipathy for Germany and German goods is growing here and we at Filene’s voted the other day not to buy any more German merchandise.”\textsuperscript{358} The official report on the vote at Filene’s cites “increasing consumer resistance” as the reason why executives voted against purchasing more German goods. Indeed, Kirstein had begun receiving letters from angry customers, such as Mrs. H. Epstein who threatened to remove her Filene’s charge account because she found German-made gloves on the store’s shelves.\textsuperscript{359}

Beginning in the fall of 1933 many AMC executives publicly severed ties with Berlin

\textsuperscript{356} “Translation of Survey Given by Messrs. ISR Schmidt Söhne,” September 16, 1933, in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{357} Memos and telegrams regarding the closing of the Berlin office in “German Office,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{358} LEK to HS, letter, October 26, 1933 in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{359} Miscellaneous Correspondence between LEK, Arkin, and Epstein, 1933, Box 66, LEK HBL.
because enough consumers demanded it and sales were negligible anyway, but no one wanted to lose the AMC’s business selling German wares in regions where consumers were willing to buy them. In early 1934 Streicher was busy securing new contracts to represent non-member stores in Wisconsin, Illinois, Oregon, and (surprisingly) Connecticut in the German markets. The four remaining staff members in the Berlin office—two buyers, a shipping manager, and a secretary—were also processing large increases in orders from department stores in Australia, Canada, and Britain. Harrods of London remained an especially important contract for the AMC to keep up at both the offices in Vienna and Berlin. Not only had the London firm been vital to establishing the Berlin office in 1921, by the mid 1930s nearly half of all the buyers who visited the AMC’s office there represented Harrods.

In March 1934, while Streicher secured contracts to represent new stores in the German markets, Macy’s finally announced it would close their trade office in Berlin; they, too, cited “consumer resistance” as the reason. The decision was not terribly surprising, but it was influential. Straus had anticipated the gradual end of Macy’s German trade four months earlier during his debate with Untermeyer in the pages of The Nation. In January, he told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that Macy’s “used to be probably Germany’s best department store customer,” and in March the firm reported a

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360 See Chapter Three for more on the AMC’s relationship with Harrods.
361 “Report on Principal Activities in Central Europe During the First Eight Months of 1937,” “Hanns Streicher Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL; HS to LEK, letter, February 16, 1934; PJR to HS, letters, September 31 & December 19, 1933; HS to PJR, letter & attached report, February 1, 1936, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL; “AMC Berlin Office reducing its staff to 10,” WWD, December 14, 1933.
98% decline on orders for German goods over the previous six months.\footnote{During the winter of 1933-34 orders for goods in Germany from R.H. Macy’s declined 98%, from $127,000 the previous winter to a meager $2,800. See “Reveals Sharp Drop in German Purchases, but Reich Wares Are Still on Display in Store,” \textit{Jewish Telegraphic Agency}, January 16, 1934.} Not surprisingly, other leading New York stores that signed the anti-boycott statement published in the \textit{New York Times} in September 1933 soon followed R. H. Macy’s lead. Michael Shaap, President of AMC-member store Bloomingdale Brothers, used the opportunity to remind Americans that his firm had closed their trade office in Berlin months earlier.\footnote{“Macy Store Shuts its Berlin Office,” \textit{NYT}, March 17, 1934, 6. The record for Lord & Taylor is confusing.} A representative from Samuel Untermeyer’s organization told the \textit{Jewish Telegraphic Agency} that while he was satisfied with R.H. Macy’s recent decision he blamed the firm for waiting so long to set a positive example for other stores.\footnote{Untermeyer’s organization changed its name to: Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights.} “Better late than never,” he chided Straus.\footnote{“Macy Action on Boycott Hailed Here,” and “News Brief,” \textit{Jewish Telegraphic Agency}, March 19, 1934.} In April, Straus announced that the firm would become the first American retailer to open a trade office in Prague. In just a few months time the Macy’s representatives stationed in Prague established contracts to represent several other American firms, and inspired other large retailers to expand their trade in Czechoslovakia, too.\footnote{HS to PJR, letter, July 10, 1935, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL; “Prague Manufacturers Cheered by Macy’s Plans,” \textit{WWD}, April 17, 1934, 32.}

Although Macy’s received the most critical attention in the press for its anti-boycott leadership, for the remainder of the decade the firm maintained one of the best boycott ratings of all New York department stores according to the JBC. Established as an umbrella organization for the boycott movement in 1936, the JBC, with Dr. Joseph
Tenenbaum at its helm, overpowered the work of Samuel Untermeyer. A JBC committee focused on the retail industry developed a rating system to accurately gauge the ongoing compliance of major department stores. Macy’s was one of five major stores in New York City, along with Gimbels, Saks, Stern Brothers, and Lord & Taylor, which earned a “non-violator” rating in 1934 and maintained it over the course of the decade. Like R. H. Macy’s, the path towards compliance was far from smooth for most of these firms. For example, just days before Lord & Taylor executives signed the anti-boycott statement alongside Macy’s in September 1933, Hirschmann had publicly announced that Lord & Taylor had boycotted German wares for months. In December, Hirschmann, who was an adamant boycott proponent, gave an interview to the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* in which he pronounced himself “disgusted” with American Jewish leaders that opposed the movement. Days later he issued an apology and made clear that his remarks reflected only his personal views and not the views of the Lord & Taylor firm. Although Lord & Taylor ultimately complied with the movement, the firm’s very public disagreements with Hirschmann reveal considerable tension among executives about how to manage their boycott policy.

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367 The JBC was the result of a merger between two leading boycott committees: one associated with the AJCONG and the other associated with the Jewish Labor Committee. See Feingold, 236-7.  
368 “Department Stores Catalogued,” Box 32A, JBC NYPL.  
369 The JBC’s use of the word “voluntarily” is not especially useful. While some executives at Lord & Taylor, such as Hirschmann were adamantly pro-boycott, others were clearly hesitant to oppose the position of R. H. Macy’s, or perhaps, of other influential retailers who were members of the AJCOMM. See “Hirschmann Criticizes Untermeyer in Nazi Boycott Activities Here,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 17, 1933; “Hirschmann Explains Views on Boycott in Letter to the Bulletin,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 24, 1933; Louis W. Fairchild, “The Big Retail Show in Boston As Seen From the Front Seat,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, September 19, 1933, 34.  
370 The JBC’s use of the word “voluntarily” is not especially useful. While some executives at Lord & Taylor, such as Hirschmann were adamantly pro-boycott, others were clearly hesitant to oppose the position of R. H. Macy’s, or perhaps, of other influential retailers who were members of the AJCOMM. Ira
AMC-member stores Bloomingdale’s and Abraham & Straus, however, were the subjects of ongoing personal investigations conducted by JBC members until 1939. Although neither store sold German merchandise in New York, both were classified as boycott violators because, according to the JBC, they persisted in using German steamliners to transport merchandise. The JBC either did not know or could not explain the bigger picture: both AMC member stores continued to purchase merchandise made outside Germany (in nearby regions, such as the Sudetenland) that was processed in the Berlin office. Moreover, as members of the AMC, both firms condoned the ongoing trade in German wares for stores located in England, Australia, Canada, and even for American stores located outside New York and Boston. In fact, the AMC’s trade office in Berlin grew significantly between 1933, when the firm reduced the staff to four, and 1938, when the firm employed twenty people. In 1935, the office processed orders totaling $650,000, though seventy-three percent of those orders were shipped to stores in England and Australia. For point of comparison, in the six months before Macy’s closed its own trade office in Berlin, the firm processed orders totaling little more than two thousand dollars. In short, the AMC trade in Berlin, which primarily targeted consumers living outside the northeastern United States and beyond national borders, was operating on a


371 “Department Stores Catalogued,” Box 32A, JBC NYPL.

scale one hundred and sixty times larger than Macy’s trade in Berlin, which specifically targeted consumers in New York.

The compliance of New York City’s department stores may have seemed an important symbolic victory for boycott proponents, but they came no closer to the ultimate goal of undercutting Germany’s economic engines, nor did they gain powerful allies in the commercial sphere. Although Time magazine touted Macy’s decision to close their Berlin trade office as “good news for Jews on the front lines of their boycott war against Nazi Germany,” the decision carried little to no economic significance and no material aid from industry leaders.\textsuperscript{373} To be sure, consumer support of the boycott played a role in undermining Macy’s German trade, but the twin forces of depression and the 1932 buy national campaign had already done the worst of the damage. Moreover, retailers who could still turn a profit selling German goods in places where consumers were willing to buy them, continued to do so. AMC member stores in the northeastern United States did stop selling German merchandise at their flagship stores, but they continued to pay dues to support the AMC office in Berlin, which, in fact, grew significantly between 1933 and 1938. Ultimately, leading retailers were more swayed by the arguments of the AJCOMM and their own bottom lines than by the ideology that underpinned the boycott movement.

Yet even for a firm like Macy’s, which closed its Berlin office in early 1934, it was hard to escape associations with Germany. Rumors circulated through the retail industry alleging that buyers were ordering gloves cut in Germany and then shipping

\textsuperscript{373} “International: Boycott Front Line,” Time, March 26, 1934.
them to Czechoslovakia for finishing to avoid German labels. Some suspected that retailers had employed a similar tactic by contracting with American manufacturers to sew cuffs that carefully disguised the labels on German gloves. In Boston the *Jewish Daily Forward* denounced Filene’s after receiving complaints from numerous readers that the firm was still selling German gloves after publicizing its decision not to do so. As described in the introduction to this chapter, Macy’s remained an important target for the Anti-Nazi Minutemen even after the firm closed its Berlin office because shipments continued to arrive from German ports or on German ships, even if the merchandise itself had been produced outside German national borders. Despite the relative strength of the anti-Nazi boycotts in New York and Boston, Germany remained a vital hub for retail trade in Central Europe. That is, Berlin remained the key headquarters until retailers redirected their focus to the Vienna trade and the Alpine aesthetic.

**Anti-Semitism, Anti-Modernism, and Alpine Fashions**

In 1936 Bloomingdale Brothers opened a new department called the North Bound Shop. Designed to look like a “real” country store, the department featured an old coal stove for shoppers to warm their hands by and sold both ski fashions and ski equipment. The North Bound Shop was also created expressly to host Maria Springer, an Austrian expert skier and ski style advisor, during her biannual visits to the United States between

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375 This was a recurring problem for retailers. Very often orders for staple imported goods were placed months ahead of time. Retailers lost money and inventory when they were forced to pull goods from the shelves. See Box 66, LEK HBL.
1935 and 1938. Springer developed a popular program in which she led shoppers through a series of “dry” ski exercises, such as the Arleberg crouch, a method of skiing developed by fellow Austrian, Hannes Schneider. After the exercises, she modeled and discussed the latest fashions worn by Europeans visiting popular ski resorts in the Alps.\footnote{PJR to L.B. Sappington, letter, September 4, 1938, “Maria Springer,” Box 82; “Ski Shop Turns Into Country Store,” \textit{WWD}, November 24, 1936, 3; “Ski Suits Inspired by Civil War Uniforms Presented at Bloomingdale’s Fashion Show,” \textit{WWD}, November 30, 1936, 10; “Bloomingdale’s Plays up American Ski Togs for Americans,” \textit{WWD}, December 9, 1935, 9; “Bloomingdale’s Pamphlet Teaches Maria Springer’s Dry Ski Exercises,” \textit{WWD}, December 13, 1935, 16; John B. Allen, \textit{From Skisport to Skiing: One Hundred Years of an American Sport, 1840-1940} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993),114-115.}

Bloomingdale’s was not the only department store to embrace ski and knitwear emanating from the Alps in the mid-1930s. Wanamaker’s constructed a picturesque Swiss Winter Village replete with yodelers an eighty-foot ski slide, the longest ever built indoors, at its New York store. The firm contracted with two prominent ski experts, one Austrian and one Swiss, who offered on-site ski demonstrations and lessons for shoppers.\footnote{“Crowds See Exhibit of Winter Sports,” \textit{NYT}, November 28, 1936, 12.} Even the high end fashion magazine \textit{Vogue} devoted its most accomplished photographer, Edward Steichen, to a ski fashion spread featuring styles from Saks-Fifth Avenue and B. Altman Co. “No, these are not Mitzi and Gretel in the Carpathian Wilds,” one of the captions explained, “but two ardent skiers of this fair land.” Smiling, fair-skinned American models posed in front of studio screens donning peasant scarves and Alpine folk-style braids. In one photograph a model joyfully hoists a pair of skis over her shoulders, and in another, two models giggle as they sniff ski wax. The styles and images were so new to the fashion world in the mid-thirties that \textit{Vogue} posed the question:

“What is this thing called skiing?”\footnote{“Auchtung!,” \textit{Vogue}, December 1, 1935, 50-53, 106.}
While the Alpine fashion craze seemed to escape associations with Berlin and the violent taint of the Nazi regime, the aesthetics and politics that underlay Alpine fashions were, in fact, not so far removed from Nazi attitudes towards Jews and modernity. When retail industry leaders looked for a trade hub to replace Berlin in the spring of 1934, civil and political unrest in Austria drove many towards Prague. However, by the end of the year the new and quasi-fascist government of Austria worked hard to increase exports to the United States, and by 1935 Vienna became the undisputed new trade hub for American retailers in Central Europe. Yet, the Alpine imagery, which Americans came to know as “Tyrolean,” that the Austrian government adopted to promote business and tourism abroad expressed a very specific vision for the country’s future: one that excluded Jews and the modern, progressive culture of Vienna. No cultural export captured the new vision for Austria better than the comedic operetta “White Horse Inn,” with its colorful Tyrolean-inspired stage sets and beautiful chorus girls donning dirndls and peasant scarves. When the show premiered on Broadway in 1936, a virtual Tyrolean fever overtook New York City and retailers stoked the craze for the better part of two years with all manner of related promotions, events, and stunts. Sales at nearly every American retail trade office in Vienna doubled or tripled or more, and many hired new staff or moved into larger quarters to keep up with the demand. In their enthusiasm for the imagery of the Tyrol, a broad swath of American consumers revealed themselves to be not unlike their provincial Austrian contemporaries. Still reeling from years of depression, a majority of Americans feared the influence of Jews in national life and many blamed modern abundance and excess for economic failures. It should hardly be
surprising then that so many welcomed the seemingly peaceable vision of traditional Alpine life and the beautiful Christian “folk” who lived there, regardless of what they understood about Austrian politics. Only after the Anschluss in March 1938, when so many provincial Austrians revealed their allegiance to and enthusiasm for the invading Nazi forces, did Americans begin to reject Tyrolean imagery. Ironically, the trade could not have survived the Anschluss, anyway, as the majority of manufacturers who produced Tyrolean fashions were Viennese Jews.

When Macy’s announced plans to close its Berlin office in March 1934 Austria was in the throes of a brief but brutal civil war. The combination of a weak constitutional government and the failure of the country’s largest bank, the Credit Anstalt, in 1931 compounded the already severe effects of the global Great Depression. By the spring of 1934 unemployment in Austria had reached nearly forty percent. In March, conservative Austro-fascist forces provoked days of fighting that sent the progressive leadership of the Social Democratic Party into exile. Forebodingly, the victory of conservatives in Austria signaled the triumph of the economically depressed but more traditional and Catholic provinces over the comparatively prosperous, progressive, and predominantly Jewish “Red Vienna.”379 From the perspective of American retailers, this period of severe political and civil unrest briefly threatened to undermine trade in the region. The building that housed the AMC’s trade office, for example was owned by the Austrian government

and, for many months in 1934, it was used as a soldier barracks. As Streicher recalled, “the entire building was occupied by soldiers, which did not give a very favorable impression to visiting buyers.” Even worse, a machine gun had been positioned at the entrance to the building and was not removed until Streicher finally filed a formal protest, months after the civil war ended. Given the militarized appearance of Vienna at the moment leading American retailers cut ties with Berlin, it hardly seemed a city in which to expand business investments.

Despite its brevity, the Austrian Civil War erupted at just the right time for many retailers eager to establish a new trade hub in Central Europe to overlook Vienna and rush into Prague instead. Czech markets had long been a vital, if less visible, part of trade in the region, so much so that the AMC ran a small office in Gablonz between 1925 and 1929. Even though the stock market crash forced the closure of the Gablonz office, it did not adversely affect the American-Czech retail trade. Instead resident buyers at the AMC Vienna office increased their purchases of low-priced gloves in Czechoslovakia after 1929. And as more American retailers looked to replace German-made merchandise in 1934, exports of Czech cotton gloves to the United States doubled and

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380 The AMC established its own trade office in Vienna in 1930 when executives purchased the firm of longtime Viennese commissionaire Max Grab upon his death. Hanns Streicher, a native Austrian and Max Grab’s top leather buyer, was placed in charge of the new AMC office, and he worked hard to make Grab’s firm more innovative and efficient. See: “Memorandum of points to be covered in subsequent written agreement entered into by Mr. Max Grab and the Associated Merchandising Corporation of New York,” c. 1930; “Passing of Max Grab Leaves Void in Europe’s Trade Circles,” WWD, August 29, 1930; both sources in folder “Vienna Office Grab Death,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
381 HS to LEK, letter, March 22, 1935, in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
382 See “Czechoslovakia,” Box 76, LEK HBL.
383 HS to LEK, letter, February 13 & December 9, 1931, LEK to HS, letter, April 8, 1931, “Hanns Streicher Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
exports of silk and woolen gloves tripled. Macy’s decision to open a new trade headquarters in Prague after closing their Berlin office made sense because, although Prague did not register as a fashion center in the American imagination, Czech manufacturers were highly skilled with lower production costs. Almost as soon as Macy’s made the announcement three large stores signed on to do their buying through the new the New York firm’s office in Prague: Bamberger’s of Newark, Carson, Pirie, Scott of Chicago, and Lasalle Koch of Toledo. Soon thereafter, Marshall Field’s of Chicago announced it would open a Prague office, and so too, would the AMC member store, J.L. Hudson Co. of Detroit. The director of the European Headquarters for Women’s Wear Daily, B.J. Perkins, followed the parade of visiting American buyers travelling through the Czech markets in 1935 and noted that “Germany’s loss has been, in part, Czechoslovakia’s gain.” He explained that retailers were attracted to the region because labor unrest was limited, access to materials was unfettered, and laborers were cheap, especially in the “home-working districts” around Gablonz and in Moravia. Still, Perkins had lots of criticism for Czechoslovakia, namely that transportation and hospitality services were woefully underdeveloped. Between Prague and the home-working districts, buyers had to travel long distances by car on “heavily rutted roads.” Along the way they stayed at shabby hotels and slept on “bumpy beds.” They had no choice but to follow a long-since-outdated “pitcher and washbowl regime.” Perkins complained that, “there are insufficient stars in the modern Baedeker to suggest the

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384 “Peak Volume in Czechoslovakia,” WWD, August 17, 1934, 9.
385 HS to PJR, letter, July 10, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
inferiority of most of the hotels at which buyers are compelled to stay while they work
with the manufacturers, sometimes for weeks at a stretch.” Despite the many advantages
in labor and materials (and the occasional pleasure of a “real Pilsner”), Perkins found his
journey alongside American buyers in Czechoslovakia barely tolerable.386

The AMC, too, had been eager to follow the rush of retailers to Prague until
Streicher submitted a report in 1935 recommending against investments in the Czech
capital. Streicher had been consulting with American and Czech diplomats for months,
and in each case he learned that the chances of an office in Prague turning a profit were
small. John Bruins, a U.S. consular official based in Prague, cautioned Streicher that the
capital city was simply too far from the Czech manufacturing districts along the Austrian
border to be a suitable place for business. And after a visit with the incoming president of
the new Czechoslovakian Export Institute, Streicher determined that his own resident
buyers stationed in Vienna had amassed more accurate information on nearby Czech
manufacturers. In the end, legal advisors to the Macy’s office in Prague from the Vienna-
based legal firm of Fousek and Klein, gave Streicher his greatest insights into the Czech
markets. Klein revealed that Macy’s’ business in Prague had fallen far short of
expectations—sales were a staggering 78% less than the firm had hoped. In addition, the
manager (who had formerly run Macy’s Berlin office) reported excessive local taxes and
repeated difficulty maintaining working permits for his buyers.387 Klein predicted that the
firm’s Prague office would not last long. Finally, Streicher paid a visit to the American

387 HS to PJR, letter/report, July 10, 1935; Dr. Klein to AMC, letter, translated by HS, July 9, 1935; Conrad
Seits to AMC, letter, translated by HS, July 8, 1935, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
Minister to Austria, George S. Messersmith, who further encouraged him to forget Prague and focus on Vienna, which was only an easy day trip from the home-working districts in Gablonz and Moravia. Without hesitation, the AMC executive board approved Streicher’s recommendation against opening an office in Prague and instead channeled their resources towards Vienna.

Streicher’s research on the viability of Prague as a trade center came during an important shift in Austro-American trade relations. Conservative officials in the new quasi-fascist Austrian government actively pursued more balanced trade relations with the United States even as they remained ambivalent to the growing influence of Nazism on the country’s northwestern border. The Austro-American trade deficit was significant. Between January and March 1934, the U.S. exported more than 15.4 million schillings worth of goods to Austria, but imported only 2.6 million schillings worth of Austrian goods. However, in the months following the departure of American retailers from Berlin, Austrian exports of manufactured textiles, especially in women’s clothing, began to climb. In March, just weeks after the Civil War ended, the new Austrian Trade Commission sent a delegation to the United States to lay the groundwork for establishing reciprocal trade treaties between the two countries. The New York Merchants Association invited Edgar Prochnik, Austrian Minister to the U.S., to speak at a luncheon held in honor of Austrian trade delegation. Prochnik told retailers that Austria was the

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388 Messersmith also told Streicher that he believed the German situation would shift, and that “sooner or later” the Nazi regime would be “swept away,” rendering a trade outpost in Prague useless. See HS to LEK, letter, November 14, 1935, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
key to peace and stability in Europe: “What you do for Austria,” he insisted, “you do for Europe.” He added a veiled threat, however, that Austrians would only continue to buy American goods if Americans bought more Austrian goods.\textsuperscript{390} Two months after the Austrian trade delegation’s American tour, the Austrian Handelsmuseum (a foreign trade organization) set up a special “American Bureau” to study problems related to the Austro-American trade.\textsuperscript{391} And shortly after that, officials at the newly founded Austrian Export Promotion Institute announced plans to establish a trade office in New York City by the end of 1935.\textsuperscript{392}

Austria’s renewed investment in trade with the United States came at the right time for leading department stores eager to disassociate with Berlin and disappointed by trade prospects in Prague; the response from the retail and fashion industries was swift. During the first five months of 1935 American purchases through Vienna increased 100% over the previous year and the U.S. registered the second largest increase of all Austrian export markets.\textsuperscript{393} Women’s Wear Daily, which had only sporadically printed a column on the Viennese markets beginning in 1931, breathed new life into its Vienna bureau. In 1934 and 1935, the “Glimpses of Vienna” column appeared several times each week with correspondents regularly reporting that more American buyers were visiting the city. Moreover, Viennese designers who had been only marginally popular in the United States prior to the anti-Nazi boycotts experienced a marked increase in demand in the

\textsuperscript{390} “Austria is Held Key to Peace in Europe,” NYT, March 16, 1934, 18.
\textsuperscript{391} “Glimpses of Vienna,” WWD, May 15, 1934, 9.
\textsuperscript{392} “Glimpses of Vienna,” WWD, December 4, 1934, 16.
mid-thirties. When the popular Viennese milliner Thea Marsi began doing tours of the United States in 1927, she visited three to five American department stores annually to mold custom hats inspired by her clients’ personalities. In October 1934 Streicher noted that, “Mme. Marsi creates a bigger sensation this year than ever before,” and the following year Marsi visited nearly thirty American department stores, many of them in such unlikely places as Louisville, Kentucky, Birmingham, Alabama, and Youngstown, Ohio. Yet while Marsi aspired to create custom designs, most of the fashions coming out of Vienna followed an aesthetic and a set of ideas that had little to do with the progressive culture and influential Jewish population of the city itself. When *Vogue* began printing feature articles on Austria and advertisements from the Austrian National Tourist Office in 1935, each one promoted folk styles and scenic imagery from the Alpine regions, most often associated with the Tyrol provinces. In a *Vogue* article penned by the Austrian Baron Hubert Von Pantz, for example, the author insists that touring Americans be fitted for “genuine” Tyrolean outfits at the Lanz Brothers shop in Salzburg before trekking into the Alps for skiing, mountaineering, and a stay at the “charming, old timbered White Horse Inn immortalized in the operetta.”

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394 “At last, a hat that expresses you,” advertisement, *NYT*, September 17, 1933, 14.
Americans had long been fascinated by folk traditions and costumes from around the world, but the growing interest in Alpine fashions in the mid-thirties upended typical associations with the trappings of folk life. Since the 1890s, folk “costumes” (typically not folk “fashions”) had made regular appearances in fashion magazines, on trade cards, and in popular ethnographic writings. Images of foreign women dressed in native clothing, however, were often employed to demarcate the distance between wealthy, fashionable, and western or white women who followed Paris trends and backward, lower class, and often non-white and/or colonized women who did not follow Paris. In a 1916 report on women in Bulgaria, for example, *National Geographic Magazine* juxtaposed a photograph of women in traditional “peasant garb” with one of female college students donning contemporary “European dress” to dramatize the cultural gulf between them. Just as wearing Paris fashions helped American women associate themselves with the monied, the privileged, and the aristocratic of Europe, so too, did the romanticization of seemingly timeless folk costumes. To admire the “folk” was to draw a line and set oneself apart from it.  

397 Yet, Tyrolean fashions struck an entirely different chord than folk costumes from other parts of the world, including from eastern, southern, and far northern Europe (only France, Britain, Germany were routinely exempt from folk characterizations in American popular culture). Heavily promoted by the new conservative government in Austria, Tyrolean imagery explicitly defined beauty as fair-skinned girls in dirndls and rural, mountainous scenery untrammeled by the distasteful elements of the modern, cosmopolitan city. Like other renderings of the folk, “Tyrolean”

397 Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*, 80-85.
denoted an aesthetic that was decidedly anti-modern, but \textit{unlike} them, it also carried associations with wealth, privilege, and purity. Since the development of sanatoriums and air cure towns in the western Alps in the mid-nineteenth century, the Tyrolean town of Meran had been the most popular and accessible destination for titled or wealthy Europeans eager to cure disease, escape the stultifying air of cities, or reinvent themselves in the fresh mountain air. Despite the fact that Tyrolean natives were generally isolated, sickly, and poor, air cure tourism recast them as hearty, strong, and attractive. Swept up in a decades-long movement to commodify mountain air for sale to European elites, Tyrolean “folk” combined all that was desirable about the seeming contentedness and timelessness of the lower class with the beauty and privilege associated with the air cure industry.\footnote{Alison F. Frank, “The Air Cure Town: Commodifying Mountain Air in Alpine Central Europe,” \textit{Central European History} 45 (2012): 185-207.} It was no accident, of course, that it was a man of wealth and title, Baron Hubert Von Pantz, who encouraged \textit{Vogue} readers to get outfitted in traditional Tyrolean styles during their Austrian Alpine vacations.

Still, embedded in the imagery and ideas associated with the Tyrol in the mid-thirties was a not-so-subtle exclusion of Jews from that which was considered beautiful and desirable. In Austria, the decade that preceded the \textit{Anschluss} was marked by a culture clash that pitted the modern and “Jewish” culture of Vienna against the conservative and Christian culture of the rest of the country, particularly the rural, poor, and mostly Catholic provinces like Tyrol. Despite the fact that Jewish intellectuals and artists were central to the creation of the popular culture that came to anchor the new “Austrian”
national identity, many non-Jewish Austrians regarded Jews as foreigners; they were not recognized as bodenständig, or belonging to the land. The project of recasting Austria in the image of the Tyrol to promote tourism and business abroad was a deliberately conservative strategy; and it was sponsored by a quasi-fascist government that masked deep-seated ambivalence about Nazism with official commitments to religious equality. Alpine imagery enshrined traditional, patriarchal, and Christian social and familial patterns. It fostered economic development in the provinces without the need for industrialization and all its social ills. To uphold the Tyrol as central to the new national identity of Austria was to imagine a country defined by its Christian provinces, to the exclusion of cities that had been shaped by the intellectual and artistic achievements of Austrian Jews. Despite the political tensions that plagued Austria in the mid-thirties, the aesthetics and assumptions that underpinned Tyrolean imagery—and more specifically, what and who was left out of the new national picture—existed comfortably alongside Nazi racial ideologies. And indeed, as provincial Austrians fell further under the sway of Hitler’s Germany between 1935 and 1938, the omnipresence of Nazi attitudes towards Jews could no longer be masked by official declarations of religious tolerance.  

There is no more revealing example of how Americans encountered Alpine or “Tyrolean” imagery in popular culture than to look at the reception of one Austria’s most successful exports, the comedic operetta, “White Horse Inn,” or Im Weissen Rössl, on Broadway in 1936. When “White Horse Inn” premiered in Vienna in 1930, the plot

399 For background on Austria’s culture wars and political conditions in the mid-thirties, see: Beller, A Concise History of Austria, 212-231.
centered on romantic intrigues, a series of marriage proposals, and tensions between the innkeeper and staff at the well-known White Horse Inn nestled in the Upper Austrian Alps (not, as it happens, in Tyrol). However, it also featured a Jewish character as the standard bearer of technological progress and drew heavily on Freudian psychology for its humor. Karl Farkas, perhaps the best-known Jewish comedian of the era, directed and starred in the premiere and several lesser known Viennese Jews filled out the cast and contributed to the show’s musical score. Even as it shamelessly promoted the beauty of the Alpine landscape and provincial Austrian women, “White Horse Inn” also offered a sharp critique of economic hard times and some compelling social commentary about the importance of Jews in bringing progress and modernity to Austria. At the end of the operetta, it is a Jewish character named Sulzheimer who resolves the plot with a technological innovation—a “wedding dress with a zip!”—albeit a comedic one. After seven hundred performances in Vienna, “White Horse Inn” traveled to Berlin, Munich, London, and Paris. However, as the show was adapted for new audiences the social commentary was either gradually edited out of the script or otherwise lost in linguistic or cultural translation. A reviewer for the London Times heaped praise on the “White Horse Inn” stage sets, colors, and jolly music that moved to “the hearty thumping of beer mugs on tables.” At the same time, he lamented that the stars of the show had been “so poorly supplied with material.” That point mattered little, however, because, as the reviewer

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concluded, any spectator who noticed the thin script would soon be “rescued by some fresh turn of the kaleidoscope.”

“White Horse Inn” had generated such a sensation across Europe that by the time the show premiered on Broadway in October 1936, Americans felt slighted by the delay. One *New York Times* correspondent irreverently noted that the show, “which has been seen almost everywhere else in the world, finally opens this evening.” Brooks Atkinson, the city’s foremost theater critic similarly remarked that, “even the oldest citizen was beginning to believe that an American version of “White Horse Inn” was only a rumble in some producer’s office.” Indeed Americans had been reading about “White Horse Inn” for years. *Vogue* had reviewed or referenced European productions of the show at least one dozen times before its Broadway premiere. When the show finally opened at the Center Theater on October 1, 1936 American critics lavished praise on the extravagant “Tyrolean” spectacles, which included breathtaking mountain vistas, scores of yodelers, hornpipe players, and traditionally outfitted chorus girls, water-filled lakes, moving steamboats, a large chalet, and a replica of the real White Horse Inn that extended well beyond the stage. Indeed the show was so extravagant and so filled with “mechanical contrivances” that it required investment from the Rockefellers and

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warranted an exclusive behind-the-scenes feature in the *New York Times*. Alongside enthusiastic praise for the sets, costumes, and music in the production, most critics admitted that “White Horse Inn” was also “incurably dull.” Some speculated as to whether dialogue was necessary at all, as it seemed only to interfere with the fantastical scenery. Even Brooks Atkinson described the story line as one in which, “nothing happens really.” Nonetheless, he concluded that the “beautiful style [of “White Horse Inn”] should endear it to the hearts of all showgoers.”

“White Horse Inn” was a visual feast and American retailers eagerly embraced promotions tied directly to the show or otherwise inspired by the so-called “Tyrolean” scenery that the show made famous. Macy’s secured exclusive rights to transform the lobby at the Center Theater into an Alpine village street lined with “Tyrolean shops” featuring the latest in imported Austrian knits, hats, and novelties. In anticipation of the show, the firm even sponsored citywide knitting contests. Women who produced the best “Tyrolean” hats and scarves were rewarded with tickets to see the show. Even Boston’s Jordan Marsh & Co. built a replica of the “White Horse Inn” stage-set in order to sell Tyrol inspired merchandise at the National Winter Sports Exhibition in December.

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1936. Both *Vogue* and *Women’s Wear Daily* celebrated “White Horse Inn” with features and photo-spreads; the latter calling the show “as close to perfection as any audience is permitted to enjoy.” Nearly two hundred articles referenced “White Horse Inn” in *Women’s Wear Daily* in the year following its American opening. Alongside the enthusiasm over “White Horse Inn,” ski fashions, too, had an “unprecedented” season of sales. Two months after the show’s opening, many retailers were “cleaned out” of ski merchandise. American manufacturers reported that their phones were ringing all the time with buyers desperate to restock reproductions of Tyrolean ski suits and sweaters. European ski experts and style advisors saw an increase in their American business, too. When Maria Springer debuted her dry ski exercises and ski fashion program in the United States in 1935 she spent just a few weeks at Bloomingdale Brothers. In 1936-37 the AMC offered her a contract to spend six weeks studying the latest fashions at ski resorts in the Austrian and Swiss Alps, and four weeks in Vienna to develop clothing samples based on her findings, and three months in the United States leading her programs in stores. Each winter she spent three months visiting department stores in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Columbus for a few weeks at a time. She became so popular that AMC executives argued about which stores she should spend the most time at and

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409 “The White Horse Inn, Dizzying Whirl of Color and Design in Motion,” *WWD*, October 2, 1936, 1; “Upholding the Banner for Tyrolean Fashions,” *WWD*, October 2, 1936, 3.
411 Springer also worked with American manufacturers to reproduce the samples, and with American buyers to educate them on Alpine ski fashions. See Sidney Reisman to LEK, letter, December 31, 1937, “Mme Springer,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
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Springer’s influence extended beyond the retail industry, too, and in 1936 she began writing articles about ski racing in Europe for the *New York Times*.  

Back across the Atlantic in Vienna, the American retail trade expanded by every possible measure between 1936 and 1937. Shortly after “White Horse Inn” opened on Broadway the Macy’s firm transferred its fledgling business in Prague to Vienna and enlarged its headquarters there. Two months later, in December 1936, the AMC, too, moved out of the Austrian government building it had inhabited since 1930 and into a new space that was double the size and equipped with more modern amenities.  

Consider that in 1933-34 the AMC’s Vienna office employed nine people and only four of them as buyers, including Streicher, who split his time with the Berlin office. Total annual sales in 1934 amounted to around $150,000. However, during just the first eight months of 1936, sales at the Vienna office totaled $390,000. Streicher reported that the staff could not keep up with the extra work and that every one of them was pulling extra late hours. In 1937, the first eight months brought in $600,000 in total sales. During that same period 175 foreign buyers visited the AMC Vienna office representing department stores in the U.S., England, Canada, and Australia, but a whopping sixty percent came from the U.S. By comparison, Americans comprised less than thirty percent

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412 See correspondence in “Mme Springer,” Box 82, LEK HBL.  
415 “Central European Notes,” *WWD*, December 18, 1936, 9; “Change Vienna Office Address, Effective December 10, 1936,” telegram, “Hanns Streicher Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.  
416 HS to PJR, letter and report, February 13, 1933, “Hanns Streicher Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.  
417 HS to LEK, letter, July 24, 1936, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
of visiting buyers at the AMC’s Berlin office. Streicher hired ten new staff members—all Austrian—and records indicate that sales doubled or tripled in every major merchandise line from infant’s wear and linens to gloves, toys, and, of course, women’s fashions.\footnote{Report on Activities in Central Europe During the First Eight Months of 1937, “Hanns Streicher, Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.} The growth of the AMC trade in Vienna was not unique; it reflected a larger trend in the industry. In one month alone, March 1937, total exports of Austrian merchandise to the United States amounted to three million schillings, marking a one hundred percent increase over March 1936.\footnote{“Central European Notes,” \textit{WWD}, June 30, 1937, 26.} Similar increases were reported nearly every month over the two-year period.\footnote{“Central European Notes,” \textit{WWD}, October 9, 1936, 20.} Those figures are all the more remarkable considering the United States imported only 2.6 million schillings worth of Austrian merchandise during the first three months of 1934.\footnote{“Glimpses of Vienna,” \textit{WWD}, May 15, 1934, 9.}

However much or little Americans understood about political conditions in Austria in the mid-thirties, it is hardly surprising that so many gravitated towards Alpine or “Tyrolean” fashions. In the United States, as in Austria, the deepening economic crisis fueled the explosion of anti-Semitic fervor at unprecedented levels. Christian demagogues like the Catholic Father Charles Coughlin and William Dudley Pelley, founder of the notorious Silver Shirts, spread hateful rhetoric about the Jewish domination of the United States and rumors circulated the President Roosevelt was being controlled by self-interested Jews or was himself Jewish. Between 1933 and 1941 Americans created more than one hundred anti-semitic organizations as compared with
perhaps a total of five in all previous American history.\textsuperscript{422} Beyond the rising tides of anti-Semitism across the United States, Americans, too, romanticized rural life and questioned modern values in the face of a depression that many believed stemmed from the false comforts and superficiality of an overabundant and immoral life. During the depression years, celebrated representations of the flappers and feminists of the twenties gave way to Dorothea Lange’s stolid “Migrant Mother” and John Steinback’s indefatigable Ma Joad. To be sure, these strains of anti-modernism and anti-Semitism materialized differently in the United States than in Central Europe. In Austria and Germany such ideologies energized powerful fascist and Nazi political parties, but no party platform in the United States officially endorsed either anti-modernism or anti-Semitism.\textsuperscript{423} Yet, while enthusiasm for the provincial Christian aesthetic of Tyrolean folk life may not have been etched into the structure of American politics, it was nonetheless an important and growing force in American popular culture, including in fashion circles. A broad swath of American consumers may have rejected the blatant violence of Nazism, but many found the comparatively idyllic, peaceful, and desirable folk life of the Tyrol wholly satisfactory, even thrilling. Perhaps few Americans noticed that Alpine imagery reinforced the same ideas about race, modernity, and religion that so many had rebelled against at the height of the anti-Nazi boycotts in 1933-1934. No matter, Americans

\textsuperscript{422} Leonard Dinnerstein, \textit{Antisemitism in America} (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), 105-127.
bought heavily into the Alpine aesthetic, anyway, because it captured a vision that many found appealing and did not (yet) bear Nazi label.

Between 1935 and 1938 Vienna emerged as the new trade hub of Central Europe in the American retail industry with Alpine imagery dominating the styles and merchandising of exports, especially in women’s and children’s knitwear and skiwear. Yet, as a 1938 AMC report on “Tyrolean fashions” makes clear, Tyrol natives had very little, if anything at all, to do with the production of their own highly desirable image in the fashion trades. Most of the manufacturers who produced Tyrolean knits and skiwear were, in fact, Jewish and based in Vienna. And if they were not based in Vienna, they were based in Czechoslovakia, mainly in the home-working districts of Bohemia and Moravia, a region filled with German speakers that was also known as the Sudetenland. In fact, American purchases in Czechoslovakia increased apace with those in Austria. During the first seven months of 1937 visiting American buyers ordered twice as much Czech merchandise as they had in 1936 and the U.S. became the largest export market for Czech products anywhere in the world, though few Americans would have known it. Buyers prized contracts with Czech manufacturers not because of any distinctive Czech style, but because of their ability to copy foreign styles and reproduce them en masse at lower costs. When an American jewelry buyer for Filene’s visited Gablonz in 1937, for example, she searched for styles that best reflected the latest

424 B. Christin Neurand to P. J. Reilly, letter, May 20, 1938, “Christin,” Box 76, LEK HBL.
425 In his reports Streicher does not break down the percentage of sales though the Vienna and Berlin offices that are due to sales on merchandise made in Czechoslovakia. However, in each of his summaries on merchandise lines Czech wares figure prominently.
innovations seen at the recent Paris Exposition. “The newest things they are making here are definitely influenced by the Couturier Jewelry in Paris,” she reported happily.⁴²⁷ Despite the dominance of Tyrolean imagery in the Vienna trade, Czech manufacturers had become so vital to the burgeoning Austro-American retail trade that major U.S. retailers began opening or reopening small offices there, mainly in the Sudetenland during the first months of 1938.⁴²⁸

At the end of 1937 Streicher had submitted a report that was full optimism for the future of trade in his region. “It is generally believed in Central Europe,” Streicher wrote, “that the period ahead holds out promise of gradual progress in improvement in spite of the hindrances of tariffs, quotas, and currency manipulations.”⁴²⁹ Of course, Streicher could not have been more wrong. After the German takeover of Austria in early March 1938, tariffs, quotas, and currencies were the least of the problems facing American retailers entrenched in Central Europe. American department stores that had pursued a policy of boycotting merchandise made in Nazi Germany in their flagships since 1934, including a number of AMC-member stores, immediately adopted the same policy

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⁴²⁷ Report on Principal Activities in Central Europe During the First Eight Months of 1937, “Hanns Streicher, Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
⁴²⁸ The Gimbel Group, Sears, Roebuck & Co., Neiman Marcus of Dallas, and the Hecht Co. of Washington, D.C. each maintained an office in Gablonz alongside the AMC. Although the AMC maintained buyers who specialized in Czech markets, Streicher found it difficult to manage payments from Vienna. Unlike the large corporate manufacturers that the AMC contracted with in Austria, France, and England, the Czech homeworkers required cash payments and they generally delivered merchandise more frequently, but in smaller lots. Streicher hired a local buyer in Gablonz, Karl Kirschner, who could not only take visiting American buyers comfortably through the home-working districts, he could also manage the regular cash-only transactions. See: BJ Perkins, “Josselson in New Gimbel Foreign Post,” WWD, May 28, 1937, 1; HS to PJR, letter, June 28, 1937, “Streicher Vienna,” Box 82; “AMC Foreign Office Budget for Year Beginning February 1, 1938;” HS to LEK, letters, March 17, April 30 & July 21 1937; HS to PJOR, letter November 22, 1937 in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
⁴²⁹ “Report on Principal Activities in Central Europe During the First Eight Months of 1937,” 10, “Hanns Streicher, Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
towards Austrian merchandise. On March 30 the AMC executive board approved a special trip for the French buyer Christine Neurand stationed at the London office to spend several weeks with Streicher in Vienna. Her purpose was to get “ideas for merchandise that can be developed in the English market to replace the Austrian merchandise.” Despite the spread of the boycott to Austria, the AMC executive board feared that American enthusiasm for Tyrolean styles would not wane in the months following the Anschluss. After studying the Austrian markets in May 1938, however, Neurand recommended against any attempt to copy Tyrolean fashions in other countries for two important reasons. First, the primary producers of Tyrolean fashions were Jewish, and as Neurand concluded, “we can assume they will leave at the first opportunity and thus we don’t know if Vienna will remain a centre of fashion.” Second, Neurand argued that because Tyrolean imagery “gets a very definite characteristic from the country itself, it would be quite useless to transplant it into another country.” Ironically, Tyrolean fashions faded in the absence of the Jewish manufacturers who created them, and the Nazi invasion of Austria suddenly rendered the “characteristics of the country” undesirable to most Americans, anyway. Neurand expected that the Anschluss signaled the end of the American craze for Tyrolean fashions, and she was right. In much the same way the rise of the Nazi Party in 1933 had made German merchandise unacceptable to an important group of consumers in the American northeast, so too, did the expansion of the

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430 P. J. Reilly to W.S. Sleap, letter, March 30, 1939, “Christin,” Box 76, LEK HBL.
431 B. Christin Neurand to P. J. Reilly, letter, May 20, 1938, “Christin,” Box 76, LEK HBL.
Nazi rule into Austria reveal the Tyrolean fantasy for what it really represented: a vision of life wholly consistent with Nazi ideologies.

“Americans All”: The American Retail Trade After the Anschluss

In December 1938 Lincoln Filene, President of Filene’s in Boston, sent a note to Kirstein with a clipping from a feature article in the *Boston Sunday Globe*, titled, “The Big News of Nineteen Thirty-Eight in Photos.” Filene had cut out two carefully chosen photos for Kirstein. The first featured British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain meeting with German Chancellor and Führer Adolf Hitler at Berchtesgaden to lay the groundwork for the Munich Agreement, which first “dismembered” and ultimately dissolved Czechoslovakia beginning in October 1938. The second photograph featured a group of aging German Jewish men forced to scrub the streets of Berlin before a “guffawing Nazi throng.” That image had been superimposed against a backdrop of storefronts in Berlin smeared with yellow paint spelling out the word “Jude” or depicting the Star of David. In the attached note, Filene hastily scribbled: “Don’t you feel that in Berlin and perhaps in Italy our corporation name should be taken from signs, letterhead, etc.? Particularly in Berlin as we are not buying German wares and I should say this was
a consistent policy for us?" Filene’s note captures the paradox that confronted American retailers in the late thirties. That is, that by the many time industry leaders sought to remove their business interests from the expanding Nazi territories, they were so entrenched in the Central European trade that leaving was nearly impossible. Filene did not suggest that the AMC make plans to close the trade office in Berlin, or that the Filene’s firm cancel its membership in the AMC. Instead, Filene merely recommended that all evidence of Filene’s’ connection to the Berlin office be erased from public view, to appear consistent with the boycott policy adopted by the firm’s flagship in 1933.

Although Vienna had become a trade hub for exports from Central Europe shipped to many American stores, Berlin remained a trade hub for exports shipped to consumers in England, Australia, and Canada, as well as to a number of American stores located outside the northeast. Despite the phenomenal growth of the Austro-American trade and the widespread influence of Tyrolean fashions, visiting buyers at the AMC’s Berlin office still placed over $100,000 more in merchandise orders than those visiting the Vienna office in 1937.

When Nazi troops entered Austria on March 11, 1938 they encountered virtually no opposition. In the conservative Alpine provinces the invasion looked more like a victory parade. However, many American retailers responded immediately. In a front-page story for *Women’s Wear Daily*, Perkins argued that, “the Nazification of Austria

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432 Lincoln Filene to LEK, handwritten memo and clipping, no date, c. December 1938, “Closing Vienna Office,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
433 “Report on Principal Activities in Central Europe During the First Eight Months of 1937,” 10, “Hanns Streicher, Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
will result in severe contraction of buying there by those American stores which have
long boycotted German merchandise.” Indeed almost no American buyers visited the
Vienna Spring Fair in 1938 and many opted to visit the Prague Spring Fair instead.\footnote{BJ Perkins, “US Buyers Abroad Show Tendency to Drop Austria from Itinerary,” \textit{WWD}, March 14, 1938, 1; “Many U.S. Buyers Passing Up Vienna for Prague Fair,” \textit{WWD}, March 16, 1938, 1.} A
number of retailers took steps to transfer the resources in their Vienna offices back to
Prague, and the Czech Export Institute predicted that American purchases in Czech
markets would soar.\footnote{R. H. Macy’s, B. Altman & Co. and a number of popular commissionaires with American contracts opened, reopened, or planned for new offices in Prague. See: “Czech Trade Notes,” \textit{WWD}, May 18, 1938, 16; “Plans to Reopen Macy’s Prague Office Continue,” \textit{WWD}, December 20, 1938, 4; BJ Perkins, “New Overseas Outlets Sought by Czechs,” \textit{WWD}, July 21, 1938, 1, 6.} Yet, as Perkins noted in July, “a cloud of politics has darkened the
outlook for trade in Czechoslovakia.” That summer, signs of political unrest in the
country reached American department stores directly. In one case, a group of pro-German
Czech workers inserted Swastika labeled propaganda circulars advocating for another
\textit{Anschluss} in cases of chinaware and gloves bound for department stores that had
boycotted Germany for years.\footnote{BJ Perkins, “New Overseas Outlets Sought by Czechs,” \textit{WWD}, July 21, 1938, 6.} Indeed, the great majority of people in the home-
working districts around Gablonz, where more than three quarters of the country’s textile
manufacturers were located, spoke German and identified as Germans. When British,
French, German, and Italian leaders signed the Munich Agreement in September, they
ceded this region, the Sudetenland, to the Third Reich and paved the way for the
subsequent German invasion of Bohemia and Moravia. All hopes for a blossoming of the
American-Czech trade faded as the Sudetenland fell under Nazi rule. “It has been an
exciting, puzzling year in Europe’s commercial markets,” Perkins reflected in a
December issue of *Women’s Wear Daily*, “and what 1939 has to offer when the new Continental map is jig-sawed together is anyone’s guess.”

When P. J. Reilly, executive director of the AMC, made an urgent trip abroad to deal with the political changes in Central Europe in December 1939, he stopped first in London. Since the beginning of the AMC’s expansion abroad in 1921 Harrods of London had been a vital alliance and source of business for the American corporation, especially in Central Europe. Since the eruption of the anti-Nazi boycotts in 1933-34, Harrods buyers had become only more essential to the success of the AMC office in Berlin. During 1937 and 1938 visiting buyers representing Harrods’ interests purchased more than forty percent of the AMC’s total sales through the Berlin office. For point of contrast, visiting buyers representing six department stores in Australia and Canada purchased another thirty-seven percent of sales, and the remaining twenty-three percent was distributed among more than a dozen stores in the United States. Without a doubt, Harrods’ buyers had the power to sustain or shutter AMC operations in Berlin after 1934.

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439 Harrods buyers also represented the interests of the three additional stores they owned during this period: Dickins & Jones Ltd. of London, Kendal & Milne & Co. of Manchester, and D. H. Evans & Co., Ltd.
440 “Orders in Berlin,” attached to HS to LEK, letter, July 14, 1938, “Streicher 1938-42,” Box 81, LEK HBL; Also see: See HS to PJR, letter, January 31, 1938, “Streicher, 1938-42,” Box 81; “Period Under Review, Feb 1 1937 to January 31, 1938, report, “Streicher, 1938-42,” Box 81, LEK HBL; With the possible exception of “Kresge Store,” it is highly unlikely that many American stores, especially in the northeast, were knowingly placing significant orders for German merchandise. After 1937, half of all the purchases made in Gablonz were attributed to Berlin sales totals in annual reports; the other half was attributed to sales totals in Vienna. However, the AMC lists a considerable sum of purchases by buyers from the non-member Kresge Stores, though there is some confusion as to whether this refers to the Kresge Department Store of Newark or the Kresge Five and Ten Cent Stores. Records from the JBC at the New York Public Library list Kresge of Newark as boycott compliant, and Kresge Five and Ten Cent Stores as boycott violators. (Sears Roebuck & Co. was also listed as a violator in 1937.) Most likely the AMC contracted with Kresge’s of Newark. See: “Why do these firms continue to handle Nazi Merchandise?” (1937?) in “Council on Decision,” Box 1; Tenenbaum to Barnes, letter, December 2, 1937, “Council on Decision,” Box 1, JBC NYPL.
but the London firm had up to that point never wavered in its purchasing levels. By December 1938, however, Reilly was ready to close the door on the AMC’s office in Berlin. When he arrived at Harrods’ flagship store on Brompton Road for a meeting with partial owner Sir Richard Burbidge, he offered the London firm an opportunity to take over the management of the AMC office in Berlin and run it on the basis of a commissionaire. “I frankly told him that we had decided to close the Vienna office, possibly Gablonz, and really would like to get out of Berlin if we could work out any practical means of having someone else take over our building,” Reilly later recounted in a letter to Kirstein. Burbidge not only declined to buy into the Berlin office, he did his level best to persuade Reilly to keep the office open at all costs. He expected that Harrods’ buyers would place orders at the same rate as they had in previous years despite the growing threats posed by the expanding Nazi regime. Burbidge even insisted that Reilly visit Berlin because he believed that Americans had developed some “misconceptions as to the real situation there.” In fact, Reilly did proceed to Berlin after his visit with Burbidge, but not to admire what did indeed seem to him like “Prosperous times” in the German capital. Instead, Reilly offered to give over the Berlin office on the

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441 Burbidge’s opinions with respect to the German trade in December 1938 were not held by all British retailers. American ex-patriot Gordon Selfridge, Sr. and his son informed Reilly that their firm had witnessed extreme adverse reaction from its customers towards German merchandise and had resolved to cut off ties with Berlin in 1939. They planned to set up the current head of the German office, whom they described as a “refugee,” as a commissionaire in Amsterdam and hoped to find in Holland enough merchandise to replace their German trade. One reason for the difference in opinion between Burbidge and Selfridge may have been that, as Reilly explained: “One advantage the English stores have is that they can have their imported merchandise merely stamped “Imported,” and the country of origin need not be specified. Ordinarily they avoid specifying the country of origin except in the case of French and American merchandise because in these two cases it helps to sell the goods over here.” It may be the case then, that Harrods shoppers were buying German merchandise without realizing it was German. See: PJR to LEK, letter, December 9, 1938, “Closing Vienna Office,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
same commissionaire basis to Streicher and his top buyer, fellow Austrian Hanns Marss, who could run the business together as commissionaires working for the AMC. Alas, they declined to take over the Berlin office, too.442

The problem with getting out of the AMC office in Berlin was not that the business was bad—thanks, in large part, to Harrods, business was quite good—but that the AMC owned the building. As Reilly lamented in the official report on his 1938 trip, the building on Lindenstrasse could be sold “at a reasonable price, but the money could not be taken out of Germany.” Nearly all the offices that the AMC established across Europe had been leased, but the corporation purchased their headquarters in Paris and Berlin in the aftermath of the First World War. At that time, currency rates and real estate investments were in the corporation’s favor, but by the end of 1938 German legal codes worked against the sale of the Berlin headquarters; Nazi officials had enacted laws that made it impossible to remove substantial amounts of capital from Germany.443 When he returned from Europe, Reilly first proposed selling the building to a German entity, taking up a short-term lease elsewhere in the city and using the proceeds from the sale to cover expenses in the new headquarters until the money from the sale ran out.444 Several members of the AMC executive board, including Kirstein, suggested another option: selling the building outright and donating the proceeds to the Joint Distribution

442 “Report of Director’s December 1938 Trip to Europe,” January 5, 1939; PJR to LEK, letters, December 9 & 23, 1938, “Closing Vienna Office,” Box 82, LEK HBL; On Hanns Marss, see: HS to LEK, letter, February 13, 1931, LEK to HS, letter, April 8, 1931, “Hanns Streicher Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.  
444 “Report of Director’s December 1938 Trip to Europe,” January 5, 1939; PJR to LEK, letters, December 9 & 23, 1938 in “Closing Vienna Office,” Box 82, LEK HBL. Also see Wyman, Paper Walls, 53-56.
Committee, a Jewish relief organization focused on redressing the worsening refugee crisis. Either the idea proved unfeasible or otherwise unacceptable to the majority of AMC stakeholders (most likely to Harrods), and in May 1939 the corporation voted not to sell the Berlin building at a loss. After months of deliberation, the executive board had approved a proposal from Streicher to drastically reduce operations in Berlin and set him up as a commissionaire paid by the AMC to fulfill orders in Central Europe for longtime clients in Britain, Austria, and Canada. In turn, Streicher would rent out the majority of space in the AMC building and use the rental income to pay himself and a skeleton staff of five, all on reduced salaries. The plan worked within laws restricting the flow of German capital and fulfilled what Reilly considered to be a “moral” obligation to Harrods, which continued to place large orders through the Berlin office in mid-1939. (Although these orders were not necessarily for merchandise made in Germany. In 1939 the Berlin office purchased merchandise in markets as far south as the Balkans and as far north as Scandinavia.) What was most striking, however, about the AMC’s plan for the office on Lindenstrasse is that even in mid-1939 the corporation took into account possibilities for future trade in Germany. “By maintaining a nucleus of an organization,” Reilly explained to Streicher, “we will be prepared again to build it up if and when conditions become so different as to justify a larger organization.”

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445 Correspondence between P.J. Reilly, William B. Thalhimer, and LEK, April 4, 5, 7, “Streicher 1938-42,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
446 P.J. Reilly to LEK, letter, January 27, 1939; Correspondence between HS and P.J. Reilly, February 3, March 13, May 20, June 5 1939; “List of Personnel Berlin Office,” June 1939, “Streicher 1938-1942,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
The AMC held on to Streicher and their office in Berlin until Germany’s declaration of war on the United States in 1941 made it illegal for them to do so. Despite the corporation’s seemingly interminable connection to the city, however, the AMC also followed larger trends in the American retail industry by sending buyers into new markets beyond Europe. In November 1939, several months after the German occupation of Paris in 1939, the United States Department of Commerce facilitated a meeting between sixteen leading American retailers, including Kirstein, and commercial officials representing fifteen countries in South and Central America. The Under Secretary of Commerce, Edward J. Noble, told the New York Times that the “principal objective of the meeting was to arrange for purchases in Latin America… of articles formerly bought in Europe.”\textsuperscript{447} In 1940 the Department of Commerce completed the first comprehensive study of handicrafts produced in Latin America that might be “suitable for sale” in the United States and established the Inter American Development Committee to “develop non-competitive consumer goods industries” in the region. Although the study determined that these markets would require significant investments to develop products beyond souvenirs and novelties in commercial volume, a number of retailers jumped at the opportunities.\textsuperscript{448} The AMC sent Edouard Léon, the former manager of the corporation’s Paris office (disbanded during the German occupation) to develop new contracts in South America, but Macy’s led development in the region.\textsuperscript{449}

\textsuperscript{447} “Retailers Devise Latin American Trade Plan,” \textit{NYT}, November 2, 1939, 10.
\textsuperscript{448} Donald S. Parris, ed., \textit{Latin American Handicraft: Types Available and Sources of Supply} (Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, 1940), “Department Stores—Correspondence with 1941 re: Inter-American Cooperation Week,” Box 1, Records of the Committee for Inter-American Cooperation, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{449} “Leon in South America for Products for AMC Units,” \textit{WWD}, December 11, 1941, 38.
1942 the New York firm transformed its flagship in Herald Square into a “Latin American Fair” devoted to the exhibition and sale of merchandise made in Latin America. More than six hundred distinguished guests, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Ambassadors representing countries across Central and South America, attended the opening gala and more than 820,000 people visited the fair during its three week run. Visitors entered the fair by passing through reproductions of grand doorways famous colonial church at Arequipa, Peru and a colonial ranch in San Jose, Mexico, and were treated to “folk” performances in “Fiesta Square,” and a replica of a “typical coffee plantation hut.” To be sure, Macy’s Latin American Fair was rife with the kind of disparaging characterizations so often attributed to colonized “folk” life and fashions, but in the official program for the fair Macy’s executives framed the exhibition in aspirational political terms framed by the Second World War: “The many great problems that face the world today place new emphasis on the word American… if we would solve those problems successfully, we must face them not as North Americans or South Americans, but as Americans all.”

In March 1934, shortly after the Macy’s firm announced they would close their trade office in Berlin, the AJCONG formed a committee to promote and support the boycott movement. The committee’s first task was to compile an “authentic and reliable data concerning substitute and equivalent articles produced by American and foreign

manufacturers." Replacements for German merchandise had long been a vital tenet of the anti-Nazi boycott movement, but few anticipated that the most popular substitutes for German wares in the mid-thirties would tacitly support Nazi attitudes towards Jews. Only formal declarations of war pushed American retailers fully beyond the scope of trade in Central Europe and opened the door to spirited promotions of Latin American merchandise in the United States. While the decision that many retailers made not to support the anti-Nazi boycott movement reveals only that they preferred other methods of resistance to or negotiation with the Nazi regime, the widespread frenzy over Alpine fashions suggests something greater, and more disturbing, about American attitudes towards Nazi ideologies. That, perhaps, a great many Americans identified more closely with the anti-Semitic and anti-modern vision that the Nazi Party endorsed than most would have been willing to admit. For if the label “Nazi” had become repugnant to many in New York City, the “Tyrolean” folk imagery exported from quasi-fascist Austria had not. Still, the firm roots that American retailers had planted in Central Europe during the mid-thirties shaped much more than their response to the anti-Nazi boycott movement. In many cases, those roots granted a degree of political power and access that allowed them to aid Jewish refugees—even as they promoted the image of the Tyrol.

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451 Memorandum from Mr. William Z. Spiegelman to Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum, March 13, 1934, Untitled Folder, Box 17, JBC NYPL.
CHAPTER FIVE

“Sometimes It Is Like I am Sitting on a Volcano”: Retailers, Buyers, Diplomats, and the Refugee Crisis before and during the Second World War

“The Jewish tragedy opened by the rise of Hitler to power hit him like a heavy personal blow. Like so many others he had blood relatives caught in the clutches of Nazi barbarism; time and again he, too, said, “There but for the grace of God go I.” But his pain went far deeper than that, far deeper than any sense of personal fear and outrage… Kirstein gave of his heart and his substance to Jewish relief.”

- Benjamin Seleman, tribute to Louis E. Kirstein in American Jewish Yearbook 1943.

“The little man who was to become the most violent figure in modern history was belaboring the audience with a harangue on the injustices of the Versailles Treaty. He vowed to tear it to shreds. Suddenly he shifted his vituperation to focus on the Jews… Hitler’s anti-Semitism was no secret. His threats against the Jews were a well-advertised part of his political program. But to hear him and see him spew forth his hatred hit me hard. He was talking about me.”

-Ira Hirschmann on witnessing Adolf Hitler speak at a Nazi Party rally in Germany in 1933.

Introduction

In late April 1938 Nazi storm troopers burst into the Vienna trade office of the Associated Merchandising Corporation (AMC). The notorious brown shirts ransacked the desk of the AMC’s longtime merchandise buyer Kurt Schwartz, a former German citizen and a Jew, before arresting him. Schwartz was one of twenty thousand Jews arrested in the immediate aftermath of the German-Austrian Anschluss in March. In the

453 Ira Hirschmann, Caution to the Winds (New York, David McKay, Co.: 1962), 42.
455 Although Streicher refers to Schwartz as a German citizen in his letters, the Nazi Party stripped Schwartz of his citizenship with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in September 1935.
course of a few terrifying months Austrian Jews were stripped of their citizenship, 
deprived of nearly all their legal and civil rights, and more or less banned from public 
life. In late March thousands of Austrians cheered at a political rally in Vienna when 
German Field Marshal Herrmann Goering threatened the city’s Jewish population. 

“Vienna must become German again,” Goering inveighed. “The Jew must know we do not care to live with him. He must go.” During the two weeks following Goering’s address, more than thirty thousand Jews, Kurt Schwartz likely among them, crowded the U.S. Consulate in Vienna seeking visa applications and information about immigration. Around the same time Schwartz sent a cable to a friend in the United States regarding an affidavit he needed to secure a U.S. travel visa. Nazi authorities intercepted the cable and, upon further investigation, learned that Schwartz was illegally manipulating currency exchange rates to keep up with the excessive taxes levied on

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457 With unemployment on the rise in 1930, the Hoover Administration sought to curb immigration by urging consuls abroad to deny visas to anyone who might become a public charge in the United States (this was a reinterpretation of the “ Likely to Become a Public Charge” or LPC clause in the Immigration Act of 1917). Thereafter visa applicants were required to provide affidavits demonstrating that friends or relatives in the United States could provide for them in the event that they could not find work. Although the Roosevelt administration abandoned this policy following the Anschluss, the Visa Division failed to establish a new policy, leaving individual consuls to develop idiosyncratic and often unreasonable demands of refugees. See David S. Wyman, Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941 (New York, Pantheon Books, 1985), 4-5, 155-58.
Jewish-owned properties in the Third Reich.\textsuperscript{458} Nazi storm troopers arrested Schwartz at the AMC trade office soon after the investigation and even visited Schwartz’s home to warn his mother that any attempt to seek American consul would only bring harm to her son.

Louis Kirstein, Chairman of the AMC’s foreign offices, learned of Schwartz’s arrest on May 17, 1938, when he received an urgent telegram at his office on Washington Street in Boston, where he also served as Vice President of Filene’s. The telegram came from the AMC trade office in Paris, where two American merchandise buyers had just returned from a business trip to Vienna and brought news of Schwartz’s arrest. Hanns Streicher, an Austrian native and head of the AMC offices in Berlin and Vienna, did not send word directly to Kirstein because he feared that any communication from his offices to the United States would make things worse for Schwartz. Though Streicher made several trips to see Schwartz’s mother, he found her unwilling to cooperate with him because of his ties to the United States. Streicher later wrote that he felt “powerless” to help Schwartz, but he and other AMC managers and buyers suspected that, if anyone could help, it would be Louis Kirstein. They were right. In a burst of transatlantic telegrams and letters, Kirstein called on retailers and diplomats stationed in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, New York, and Washington, D.C., to facilitate Schwartz’s release in less than one week. Though Schwartz was only one of hundreds of thousands of Jews

\textsuperscript{458} Hanns Streicher sent a letter to Louis Kirstein after Schwartz was safely out of prison to explain that these were the reasons for the arrest. During Schwartz’s imprisonment there was no explanation given for his arrest. See HS to Louis E. Kirstein [hereafter LEK], letter, June 3, 1938, “Streicher Berlin 1938-1942,” Box 81, LEK HBL. For details regarding taxes and regulations imposed on Jewish-owned properties throughout the Reich in April 1938 see Wyman, \textit{Paper Walls}, 6, 29.
terrorized by the expanding Nazi regime in the spring of 1938, he was fortunate enough to be one of the comparatively few who made it to the United States before the end of the year. More remarkable still, by October, Kurt Schwartz was gainfully employed in New York City at Bloomingdale’s, a longtime member of the AMC stores network.

Historians have long charged Americans, especially leading American Jews and government officials, particularly those serving in the U.S. State Department, of inaction and ambivalence in the face of violent Nazi persecution. More recently, studies have acknowledged the extent to which a rising tide of virulent anti-Semitism and a political climate hostile to any interventions abroad crippled American responses to the refugee crisis. These studies, however, have tended not to emphasize relief and rescue efforts undertaken by influential Americans working outside traditional channels—that is to say, Americans working beyond the field of traditional government action and outside the

459 Wyman estimates that perhaps thirty thousand Jews left Austria and Germany for the United States in 1938. See Wyman, Paper Walls, 37.
reach of formal relief and rescue initiatives. While many historians have acknowledged
the herculean efforts of Ira Hirschmann, an executive at Bloomingdale’s who forced his
way onto the War Refugee Board before it was officially formed, none has explored how
a retail executive forged such an extraordinary path. To be sure, Hirschmann was a
man of unusual courage and conviction, and he possessed the kind of exemplary
negotiation skills that led to the release of tens of thousands of prisoners from
concentration camps in Romania. Still, Hirschmann’s roots in the American retail
industry were not incidental to his outstanding interventions in Europe’s refugee crisis.

No field of American commerce was as deeply shaken by the rise of Nazism in Europe,
in part because retail executives were not dependent on third-party news reports or other
intermediaries for information. Through regular communication with their foreign trade
offices abroad, retailers were reliably informed about the dangers wrought by Adolf
Hitler’s violent anti-Semitism from the very beginning. More importantly, though, the
leaders of the American retail industry were overwhelmingly Jewish. In 1937, American
Jews owned two thirds of the wholesale and retail establishments in New York City, the
nation’s commercial capital, including the largest and most influential firm, R. H.

461 Hirschmann’s work on the War Refugee Board appears in several scholarly studies, see: See: Rebecca
L. Erbelding, “About Time: The History of the War Refugee Board” (PhD diss., George Mason University,
2015); Charles King, Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.,
2014); Rafael Medoff, Blowing the Whistle on Genocide: Josiah E. Dubois, Jr. and the Struggle for a US
Response to the Holocaust (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009); Richard Breitman and
Alan M. Kraut, American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945 (Bloomington: Indiana
University Press, 1987), 143; Jean-Claude Favez, The Red Cross and the Holocaust, edited and translated
by John and Beryl Fletcher (London, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 111. For his work as
special envoy to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration after the war, Hirschmann
appears in: Hasia Diner, We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence
wrote two books that touch on his experience on the WRB, see: Hirschmann, Caution to the Winds;
Macy’s. Studies have shown that similar patterns of Jewish leadership in the retail and wholesale fields emerged in major cities across the country.\textsuperscript{462} Retail executives were acutely aware of the realities facing Europe’s Jews not only because of their professional connections in the capital cities of the Third Reich but also because of their familial and social ties to countless men and women victimized by Nazi anti-Jewish policies.

When Hirschmann accepted an executive post at Bloomingdale’s in 1938, he also joined the AMC network, which had grown to include twenty-two department stores located in twenty cities across thirteen states. On the eve of the \textit{Anschluss}, AMC member stores maintained large, cooperative trade offices in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Brussels, and Florence, and six smaller offices stationed throughout China and Japan. The firm also managed export accounts for department stores based in Canada, England, Scotland, Holland, Sweden, France, South Africa, and Australia. Scores of cooperative buying groups based in New York City operated trade offices in Europe by the mid-thirties, but the AMC had three times the buying power of any one of them. In addition, the AMC had developed more than two hundred lines of its own branded merchandise, such as Barbara Lee women’s wear or Baby Crest infant goods, which were sold in department stores around the world. Without question, it was the United States’ largest and most innovative retail corporation during the interwar period. And, equally important to this story, nearly all of the leading executives at the stores that formed the core


Retailers associated with the AMC went to great lengths to undermine the influences of Nazism on their business abroad and to intervene in Europe’s refugee crisis after 1933. If Hirschmann’s work as the first special attaché to the War Refugee Board marks the culmination of these efforts, then Kirstein’s efforts to shield his relations, friends, and colleagues in Germany and Austria from Nazi persecution must be considered the foundation. A towering figure in the retail industry and well beyond it, Kirstein cultivated professional and social connections that granted him privileged insights into the terrible conditions facing Europe’s Jews. Over the course of the decade he supported a growing number of relations and friends through his partnership with the AMC manager stationed in the region, Hanns Streicher. After the German invasion of Austria in March 1938, Kirstein and Streicher called on their many contacts in the U.S. State Department, especially Assistant Secretary of State, George S. Messersmith, to help a handful of refugees make their way out of the Third Reich to safety in the United States, England, and even Cuba. Although these efforts were not always successful and
affected only a small and select group of refugees, they reveal how influential businessmen and diplomats collaborated privately to resist Nazi influences and aid individuals suffering under the anti-Jewish policies of the Third Reich.

It was Kirstein who brought Hirschmann into the fold of the powerful AMC network during the early stages of Austria’s refugee crisis in the summer of 1938. Hirschmann drew on an overlapping constellation of social and professional contacts, including Kirstein and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, to contrive a position on the War Refugee Board, where his impact was far reaching. From his post in Ankara, Turkey in 1944, Hirschmann negotiated a series of deals that spared the lives of tens of thousands of Europe’s Jews. AMC retail executives were uniquely positioned to respond to the refugee crisis—in ways both large and small—because of their connections within the borders of the Third Reich and the contacts they cultivated in Washington, largely through diplomats stationed abroad. That so many retail executives were themselves Jewish was also paramount. AMC executives confronted the dangers of Nazism long before most other Americans because of their extensive familial, social, and professional ties to Jews living in Germany and Austria. And although Jewish retailers like Kirstein and Hirschmann did not always agree on the answers to critical questions facing American Jewry about how to respond to the threat of Nazism, in one vital respect they shared some common ground. Both men felt a calling to leverage their powerful

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464 Kirstein and Hirschmann disagreed over the anti-Nazi boycotts, the former was a vocal advocate and the latter was ideologically opposed. See Chapter Four for a detailed account of the boycotts.
transatlantic resources and contacts in the U.S. State Department to respond meaningfully to the greatest humanitarian crisis of the twentieth century.

Anti-Nazis and the AMC: Networks between Washington and Berlin

Hanns Streicher had been in charge of the AMC trade office in Berlin for less than a year when he received an ominous knock on the door. It was October 1933 and a uniformed Nazi officer presented an order for Streicher and his staff to decorate the exterior of the AMC building with swastika flags. AMC executives had purchased the building that housed its foreign trade office on Berlin’s Lindenstrasse in 1921, when the street was at the heart of the city’s promising export district. In 1933, however, the Nazi Party chose Lindenstrasse as a central thoroughfare for political parades. Much to the surprise of the Nazi officer, Streicher boldly refused to comply with the order. “If all businesses are going to be decorated,” he calmly explained, “we shall do likewise and put out the American flag and the German black-white-red flag.” The officer insisted under the threat of force, but Streicher was resolute. He later learned that, by German law, no foreign firm could be forced to display the swastika flags. Regardless, Streicher’s refusal was no small act of courage. Nazi thugs had already beaten enough foreigners in the

465 Interestingly an AMC real estate report notes that in 1933 Lindenstrasse was also riddled with empty and deteriorated storefronts. The swastika flags would have obscured these symptoms of a depressed economy. See: “Translation of Survey Given by Messrs. ISR Schmidt Söhne, September 16, 1933 “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL; For a description of the Lindenstrasse district, see: “Toys Largest Item Bought in German Market,” Women’s Wear Daily, June 14, 1921.
streets for refusing to appropriately honor party symbols that U.S. Ambassador William Dodd had requested a personal meeting with Chancellor Hitler to demand state intervention. Streicher wrote at length about the episode with the Nazi officer in a letter to Kirstein at Filene’s in Boston. “Sometimes,” Streicher confessed with an eerie prescience, “it is like I am sitting on a volcano.”

In order to defend his relations, friends, and colleagues against the influences of Nazism as early as 1933, Kirstein cultivated the close support and friendship of many influential people, but two men in particular stand out: Hanns Streicher, a leather goods buyer from Gmunden, Austria, and George S. Messersmith. While Streicher’s name is all but lost to history and the details of his life are scant, Messersmith is well known to historians, particularly for his rigid adherence to restrictive immigration policies that kept thousands of would-be immigrants out of the United States. Messersmith was arguably the best-informed official in the State Department as to the crisis facing Europe because of the critically important posts he held over the course of the 1930s: first as Consul General at Berlin (1930-34), then as Minister to Austria (1934-37), and finally as Assistant Secretary of State (1937-1940). Although Messersmith is by far the better known of these two important figures in Kirstein’s circle of contacts, Streicher’s role ought not to be overshadowed. It was through Streicher’s visits to the U.S. Consulate in


467 In his response to Streicher’s letter, Kirstein wrote: “I think you showed a good deal of courage and certainly did the right thing in refusing as an American concern, to display the swastika flag.” See: LEK to HS, letter, October 26, 1933; HS to LEK, letter, October 10, 1933, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
Berlin that Kirstein learned first-hand of the extent of Messersmith’s anti-Nazi feelings. More importantly, Streicher himself was Kirstein’s most intimate ally in a quiet campaign against Nazi anti-Jewish policies, for it was Streicher who personally attended to the needs of Kirstein’s relations and friends in Germany and Austria. In 1933 and 1934 Kirstein promoted Streicher to manager of the AMC offices in both Berlin and Vienna and entrusted him with dispensing aid to his relations in Germany. Over the same period, both Kirstein and Streicher developed connections to Messersmith that would prove indispensable after the German invasion of Austria in 1938. A close look at these overlapping professional, political, social circles reveals how Kirstein established a private network of anti-Nazi retailers and diplomats who would provide vital assistance to his relations and friends, especially after 1938.

Louis Kirstein was the son of a Jewish lens grinder, Edward Kirstein, who fled Leipzig in the wake of the revolutionary uprisings in 1848. He was born in Rochester, New York in 1867 and, after a youth checkered with failed business ventures, married Rose Stein, daughter of the successful owner of the men’s clothing company, Stein-Bloch. Eventually Kirstein found his way to Filene’s in Boston and rapidly ascended the executive ladder to become a partial owner in the business by 1911. Though he was never a religious man, Kirstein was deeply committed to his social and civic obligations as a

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Jew and as an American. During the First World War he entered into important Democratic Party circles when he served as Chairman of the Board of Control for Labor Standards, and in the 1920s he became a leading figure in several Jewish organizations, especially the elite American Jewish Committee (AJCOMM). By the mid-thirties, Kirstein had become a giant in the American retail industry, was regularly elected to the executive board of the AJCOMM, and Roosevelt had appointed him to serve as an administrator on the Industrial Advisory Board. Kirstein was widely celebrated for his fairness, modesty and generosity. At his seventy-fifth birthday celebration, he was called “Boston’s first Jewish citizen,” and it was said that he had given away “practically his entire income for philanthropic causes.” Thus, during the period that Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany, Kirstein commanded a vast network of social and professional contacts that were rooted in the country’s leading Jewish organizations and retail corporations but also extended deep into the inner circles of Washington and as far as the foreign offices of the AMC.

Although Kirstein was meticulous in his oversight of all the foreign offices in the AMC, he took special care to ensure that the right person took charge of the Berlin office in the spring of 1932. When AMC executives voted to purchase a building in Berlin in 1921, they agreed to place their head representative in Central Europe, a former Harrods’ buyer and Englishman named Roger Day, in charge of the new trade office. Day

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469 In many memorials published at Louis Kirstein’s death, his equal devotion to being a patriotic American and an exemplary Jew is a constant theme. In his tribute, Benjamin Selekmann reflected on witnessing the life of Kirstein: “There moves—every inch of him—an American and a Jew.” See Selekmann, “Louis Edward Kirstein,” 36.
successfully developed the AMC’s German trade through the 1920s, but by the early 1930s the global depression and a surge of popular economic nationalism in both the United States and Britain decimated sales in the region. The AMC’s offices in Berlin and Vienna experienced a tremendous drop in sales volumes.\textsuperscript{470} During the spring of 1932, as AMC executives debated how to cut costs and consolidate their buying operations in Central Europe, Adolf Hitler established himself as a major force in German politics by earning more than one third of the vote in the presidential elections. Roger Day wrote to Kirstein from the trade office in Berlin with some positive reflections on Hitler’s triumph: “The majority of serious thinking people here cannot help but welcome the fact that the sword has now fallen,” Day conceded. “It is now up to Hitler to fulfill the many promises he has made.” Less than three weeks later Kirstein wrote to Day with the support of the AMC’s executive committee to ask for his resignation.\textsuperscript{471} In turn, executives agreed to promote a relative newcomer to the organization to serve as the head of operations in both Berlin and Vienna: Hanns Streicher.

While there is very little information on Streicher’s personal background in the archival records of the AMC, enough of his correspondence with Louis Kirstein and other AMC executive survives to provide a glimpse into his politics, which were avowedly anti-Nazi, and his character. A native of Gmunden, Austria, Streicher was a top leather goods buyer for the popular Vienna firm, Max Grab & Co., which represented the

\textsuperscript{470} See Chapter Three for an early history of the Berlin Office. See Chapter Four for a discussion of the German trade, economic nationalism, and the depression.

\textsuperscript{471} Roger Day to LEK, letter, April 26, 1932; LEK to Day, letter, May 21, 1938, “Day, 1925-37,” Box 80, LEK HBL.
AMC’s buying interests in that region for most of the 1920s. When the founder of that firm died in 1930, the AMC purchased the business, made it their own, and placed Streicher in charge. Within two years Streicher was promoted over Day to serve as the head of operations for the AMC in both Berlin and Vienna. When he first arrived in Berlin, Streicher expressed his disdain for Nazi political propaganda in letters to Kirstein. “I saw on a poster four words, ‘Hitler… our last hope,’” Streicher lamented in August 1932. “Surely a country must have reached the bottom when such words can appear on posters.” During his first year in Berlin, Streicher became devoted to “curing the whole office of Nazi spirit.” His efforts included the delicate task of discharging an employee, a German citizen named Mr. Klippel, who had become an official member of the Nazi Party. In order to manage Klippel’s dismissal responsibly and legally, Streicher appealed to the U.S. consulate in Berlin for guidance. Fortunately for Streicher, who had as yet spent little time in Berlin, a friend of his in the American embassy in Vienna granted him a personal introduction to the most influential consular official in Berlin: Consul General George S. Messersmith.

Messersmith’s connection to Streicher, and later to Kirstein, offers a rare insight into the private actions of an influential diplomat whose legacy has long confounded historians. Messersmith’s principal biographer argued that, in the context of the anti-

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472 See PJR to Mr. Paul Fischer, letter, November 28, 1932, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL. Also see documents in “Establishment of Vienna Office,” Box 81; documents in “Vienna Office Grab Death” Box 82, LEK HBL; “Vienna Office is Reopened by the AMC,” Women’s Wear Daily. June 9, 1947, 2.

473 See: HS to LEK, letter, August 3, 1932, in “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.

474 HS to LEK, letter, October 10, 1933, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL. Also, see Streicher’s reference to Messersmith who “has been most helpful to me on many occasions,” in: HS to LEK, letter, February 16, 1934, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
Semitism that gripped the United States in the 1930s, the diplomat’s record on “Jewish matters” was relatively good, but “by any ethical standard, it was not good enough. He failed the persecuted when they most needed him.”\footnote{See Stiller, \textit{George S. Messersmith}, 50-51.}

For a brief period in the mid 1930s, a number of influential American Jews, Justice Louis D. Brandeis and Rabbi Stephen Wise among them, considered Messersmith their best ally in the State Department, but, as historians have noted, this fact says more about the attitudes of the State Department than it does about Messersmith. Born in rural Pennsylvania in 1883, Messersmith trained as a secondary school teacher and worked as a school principal before finding his way to a career in the State Department. He was twice counseled against pursuing the diplomatic branch of the Foreign Service because he lacked the financial resources, educational background, and social connections to succeed on that track.\footnote{These recommendations to enter the consular service came despite the fact that Messersmith fared well enough on the Foreign Service exams to earn an appointment in 1914. See Stiller, \textit{George S. Messersmith}, 6-7.} Instead, Messersmith entered the consular service in 1914 and spent his first years at an inconsequential consul in Fort Erie, Canada. Fifteen years later, however, as Consul General at Berlin, Messersmith witnessed the rise of Adolf Hitler and supplied Washington with the best daily analyses of German affairs. No one in the State Department was better informed as to the threat Hitler posed to Europe and to Jews, and none was more openly critical of the Nazi regime. Yet Messersmith neither put forth any proposals for asylum in response the refugee crisis nor did he yield in his unbending commitment to upholding restrictive immigration policies. As late as 1936 Messersmith insisted that the State Department
guide for consular officials include a reminder that they should not aim “to maintain the United States as an asylum or refuge for dissatisfied and oppressed people in other parts of the world.” At a time when U.S. immigration procedures made no official exceptions from the usual visa requirements for refugees, Messersmith’s rigid adherence to restrictive policies sealed the fates of thousands of Jews trapped in the Third Reich.

While it is not surprising that Streicher found Messersmith to be a wellspring of advice on how to cure the AMC’s Berlin office of the Nazi spirit, it is surprising that he also found the Counsel General willing to aid two aspiring Jewish immigrants. In the early 1930s, U.S. consular officials in Germany issued visas at a rate far below the annual quotas (sometimes up to 75-80% below). Due to the widespread influence of restrictionist immigration attitudes in Washington, consular offices were woefully understaffed and many officials adhered to financial requirements so stringent that few would-be immigrants could meet them. In 1934, Alan Steyne, a young consular official and also Louis Kirstein’s nephew, described his work at the consulate in Hamburg as “exciting,

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477 Bat Ami-Zucker, “American Refugee Policy in the 1930s,” in Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore, eds., Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 156.
479 Restrictionist attitudes were so dominant that in 1931 the Senate would have passed, by a large majority, a bill to introduce ninety percent reductions in all the immigration quotas set in the National Origins Immigration Act of 1924. Fortunately, the legislative session ended before the vote could take place. See Wyman, Paper Walls, 4. Also see Bat Ami-Zucker, “American Refugee Policy in the 1930s,” 151-168.
but too busy… at times I feel like a one-armed paper hanger.”

In this harried climate, Messersmith, the top-ranking consular official in Germany, made time for several meetings with Streicher in which he offered guidance on how to discharge the AMC employee who had joined the Nazi Party. Moreover, Messersmith was “most obliging” in his acceptance of visa applications that Streicher had completed on behalf of two men whom he had never met: the German Jewish nephews of Julius Baer, a longtime friend of Kirstein and founder of the AMC member store, Stix, Baer & Fuller in St. Louis, Missouri.481 As the nephews of a wealthy American retailer, the Baer nephews would have had no trouble meeting the financial requirements for immigration to the United States; however, direct access to Messersmith through Streicher allowed them to circumvent a lengthy screening process by which consular officials could reject applicants on the grounds of physical, mental, or moral defects, or for political and economic reasons.482 In a letter to Kirstein, Streicher marveled over Messersmith, who had “really gone out of his way to help in every respect.”

Streicher and Messersmith remained friendly and met for occasional dinners even after the latter received his appointment as Minister to Vienna.484

In December 1933 Kirstein acknowledged that he was “anxious” to meet Messersmith, but so too, was the diplomat eager to meet Kirstein. Through his nephew at
the consulate in Hamburg, Kirstein learned that Messersmith was looking for introductions to Supreme Court Justices Louis D. Brandeis and Benjamin N. Cardozo (the first and second Jewish Justices, respectively). While it is possible that Messersmith was seeking the social connections that might help him advance into the Foreign Service, it’s more likely that he wanted to confer with leading American Jews who shared his concerns over the rise of Hitler in Germany.\(^{485}\) In January 1934 Messersmith and Kirstein met for the first time at a dinner in New York City given by Dr. Jacob Billikopf, a vocal advocate for Jewish civil rights who was especially concerned with the plight of refugees. Kirstein described the event as a “Jewish who’s who” of the country, with the exception of Messersmith and James G. McDonald, a fellow diplomat who would later become Chairman of the President’s Advisory Committee on Refugees.\(^{486}\)

Several weeks following that dinner, Messersmith accepted an invitation to visit Kirstein at his home in Boston. Over the course of an afternoon, Messersmith imparted what Kirstein called “valuable information and suggestions” regarding the “German situation.” Thereafter, the two men met whenever they could, either in Washington or Boston, and Kirstein introduced Messersmith to several influential friends and acquaintances, including the

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\(^{485}\) See Shafir, “George S. Messersmith,” 35-36; Also see Stiller, *George S. Messersmith*.

\(^{486}\) Billikopf was President of the National Conference on Jewish Social Service. See LEK to Alan N. Steyne, letter, January 23, 1934, “Alan Steyne, 1932-42” Box 54, LEK HBL; “Future Held Dark for Exiled Jews,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1932, N6; Also note that the two crossed paths before this, see Messersmith’s recollections of Kirstein as “playing a major role” in the meeting of the International Chamber of Commerce in “Meetings of the International Chamber of Commerce in Europe,” in MSS109 2030, in George S. Messersmith Papers at University of Delaware Library; [hereafter GM UD]; Also note that Kirstein’s fellow executive at Filene’s, Edward Filene, was a planner and co-organizer of the International Chamber of Commerce beginning in the late 1920s. See Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth Century Europe* (Cambridge, Belknap Press: 2005), 130-186.
two Supreme Court Justices, Felix Frankfurter (founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union and future Supreme Court Judge), Senator Robert F. Wagner (D-NY), and the influential journalist Walter Lippmann. 487 In turn, Kirstein’s nephew at the Hamburg Consulate received a rare double promotion and Messersmith’s own troubled nephew was offered a job at R. H. White’s department store, in which Kirstein was a partial owner. 488 Increasingly, Messersmith and Kirstein also made social engagements that included their wives. In early 1937 the two couples even planned to meet in Vienna during one of Kirstein’s trips to the AMC foreign offices, but the gathering never took place because Messersmith was called back to Washington to serve as Assistant Secretary of State. 489 Instead, Kirstein and his wife spent several days touring Austria with Streicher and his extended family. 490

In 1934, however, while Kirstein was still building his connection to Messersmith, Streicher traveled to the United States, where, among other business, he held an important private meeting with Kirstein. Due to the rise of consumer-driven anti-Nazi boycotts, Streicher’s trade office in Berlin had fared the worst of all the AMC’s foreign offices during the lowest point of the Great Depression (1933-34). Regardless, 487 With the exception of Wagner, all of Kirstein’s introductions connected Messersmith with influential American Jews. It should be noted, however, that Wagner became one of the foremost advocates of refugees in congress and collaborated on the Wagner-Rogers Bill to welcome twenty thousand Jewish children suffering in the Third Reich to the United States in 1938. The bill failed to pass. See For the details of these early meetings between Kirstein and Messersmith, see: LEK to Alan N. Steyne, letters, December 15 & 29, 1933, January 23, April 10, 1934, “Alan Steyne, 1932-42,” Box 54, LEK HBL. 488 GM to LEK, letters, August 4 & September 15, 1936, March 8, 1939, “Messersmith, GM,” Box 28, LEK HBL. 489 GM to LEK, letter, July 1, 1937, “Messersmith, GM,” Box 28, LEK HBL. 490 HS to LEK, letter, July 1, 1937; LEK to HS, letter, August 20, 1937, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
AMC executives had selected Streicher as the sole representative from the foreign offices to travel to the United States carrying merchandise samples from all the European sales regions. Streicher spent most of his time traveling the country to visit the flagships of AMC member stores, but he also attended the annual meeting of AMC executives. At some point during that meeting, Kirstein met privately with Streicher and asked him to take on more responsibility providing financial support to his relations living in Berlin, whose suffering under Nazi anti-Jewish policies was growing more severe. While there are no records of the words exchanged in this conversation, it is clear that Streicher obliged. When Streicher returned to Berlin from his American trip he received a visit from Kirstein’s cousin, Rosi Bohm, and her husband, who had become seriously ill. The couple learned that, due to the effects of anti-Jewish policies on the medical profession in Germany, they would have to leave the country to secure appropriate medical care, but they had neither the financial means nor the ability to make such arrangements.\(^{491}\)

Without hesitation, Streicher helped the Bohms make travel arrangements to Denmark and he set up a draft account through the AMC that they could access once they left country. To be sure, Kirstein reimbursed the firm for the Bohm’s expenses, but such a transaction could not have taken place so readily without the AMC office in Berlin—or without Streicher’s support. In reflecting on Streicher’s handling of the Bohm’s circumstances, Kirstein wrote, “I am sure that their lives are a good deal brighter because

\(^{491}\) Shortly after Hitler came into power he passed series of decrees that cut Jews off from medical practice, which, in turn, made it difficult for Jews to secure medical care. Additionally, new tax regulations made it nearly impossible for Jews to take any capital out of Germany. Even if the Bohms had the money to pay for the treatments, Streicher noted, it would be impossible for them to leave the country with it. See Wyman, 28; HS to LEK, letter, October 3, 1934, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
they realize there is someone who understands their situation and has some sympathy for
them.”

Over the course of the decade Streicher would become a vital intermediary
between Kirstein and a growing number of distant cousins, nieces, and nephews living
under the Nazi regime. Kirstein first became acquainted with these family members in
Germany during a trip to Europe on government business after the First World War.

Following that trip, Kirstein and his two siblings began sending occasional financial aid,
clothing, and even foodstuffs to their cousin, Ida Maria Zachart, who had lost her
husband in the war, and her grown daughter, Ilse Sternberg, who had left an abusive
husband and cared for their children on her own. Around 1925 Kirstein began
transferring occasional funds to Zachart and Sternberg through the AMC office in Berlin
rather than directly to their homes, at least in part because the two women moved
often. However, after a series of decrees in 1933-35 stripped Jews of their citizenship
and expelled them from nearly all forms of professional labor, many more families found
themselves in need of financial assistance. Kirstein responded by providing regular
monthly allowances, and any other support as needed, to at least five families connected
to him through blood or marriage. Streicher facilitated the distribution of these
allowances by using AMC merchandise receipts to record “orders” to family members
and forwarding these receipts directly to Kirstein’s secretary at Filene’s, who paid for the

492 LEK to HS, letter, March 5, 1934; LEK to HS, letter, October 16, 1934; HS to LEK, letter, October 3,
1934, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
493 See Chapter Three for more on Kirstein’s 1919 trip to Paris.
494 See all letters in this file, but especially: Zachart to LEK, October 10, 1919, “Germany
Correspondence,” Box 54, LEK HBL.
orders through Filene’s accounts. Kirstein then reimbursed Filene’s from his personal funds, to which both his sister and brother also contributed.\textsuperscript{495} Above and beyond these transactions, Streicher became an important personal friend to several of Kirstein’s relations, especially to Dr. Heymann and his extended family. Although Heymann was pushed out of his teaching position in 1933 he was offered another post as long as he agreed to teach in the “nationalistic spirit.” At his new school, Heymann was forced to begin every morning with a salute to Hitler and attend Nazi parades. While at dinner with Streicher one evening, Heymann exclaimed hopelessly: “You can put me in a concentration camp tomorrow….”\textsuperscript{496} Streicher kept up his friendship with Dr. Heymann and regularly updated Kirstein on the professor’s wellbeing.

On the eve of the German invasion of Austria in March 1938 Kirstein had developed connections to Streicher and Messersmith that extended well beyond business concerns. Streicher was closely intertwined with Kirstein’s private efforts to support his relations with financial assistance, and checked in with them monthly. Messersmith had returned from Europe to serve as Assistant Secretary of State in Washington, D.C., a post he held over the critical period between 1937 and 1940. While both Streicher and Kirstein lamented Messersmith’s removal from Europe, in fact, the position granted him even greater influence over consular officials stationed in Berlin and Vienna. It also

\textsuperscript{495} Archival records indicate that Kirstein began transferring funds to a niece in Germany via Filene’s for the first time in 1925. However, a brief survey of correspondence between Streicher and Kirstein reveals that they began transferring monthly allowances to a number of additional family members in 1933. See Secretary to Louis E. Kirstein to American Express Company, letter, September 28, 1925, “G Financial”; Ilse Sternberg Receipt, March 18, 1930, “Germany Financial,” Box 8, LEK HBL. Also browse “Streicher Berlin” in Box 81 and the family files in Box 8, LEK HBL.

\textsuperscript{496} HS to LEK, letter, October 10, 1933, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
provided more opportunities for Kirstein and Messersmith to meet personally in Washington to discuss what they called the “German situation.” Despite Messersmith’s official opposition to changing immigration policies for refugees, he worked with Kirstein to expedite visas on behalf of several people after the Anschluss. And despite Streicher’s citizenship in the Third Reich, he continued to act as Kirstein’s intermediary in Berlin and Vienna on behalf of people whose suffering he had come to know so well.

**Retailers, Dignitaries, and Refugees After the Anschluss**

The American diplomat John C. Wiley arrived in Vienna to begin his new post as Consul General shortly before the German invasion of Austria in March 1938. In the aftermath of the invasion, he received a missive from George Messersmith, then serving as Assistant Secretary of State in Washington, instructing him to make no changes to any immigration policies at the consulate. There was, at the time, considerable apprehension as to the status of U.S. diplomats in Austria given the dissolution of the government there. Over the next few months, however, the anti-Jewish measures that had evolved over a five-year period in Germany went into effect rapidly across Austria. Reporters estimated that across the country nearly 80,000 Jews had been dismissed from their jobs and not a single Jew in Vienna was permitted to retain an automobile. Nazi fanatics regularly picketed, vandalized, and looted Jewish owned shops and businesses, and gangs of Nazi thugs publicly humiliated and injured Jews with little to no repercussions from
the government or police.\footnote{497} In June, as tens of thousands of Austrian Jews rushed the foreign consulates desperate to emigrate, Consul General Wiley wrote to Messersmith to express concern about the “constantly increasing” dimensions of the catastrophe. He characterized Nazi policies as “utterly lunatic” and lamented that consular officials in Vienna were immersed in “heartrending misery.” Although Wiley reiterated his agreement that the State Department ought to remain “aloof” from such matters, he confided in Messersmith that the “instinct to do something for everybody is overwhelming.” Private organizations, Wiley concluded, or “a private person with tact and energy might be able to alleviate matters with the Austrian authorities.”\footnote{498}

Kirstein was indeed a private person with both tact and energy who tried to improve the circumstances of a select group of people living in Austria and Germany after March 1938, but he did not manage it alone. On behalf of his relations, a handful of friends, and some AMC employees, Kirstein called on all of his contacts in the State Department and in the retail industry to intervene where he could. In some cases, most notably in the case of Kurt Schwartz, who, as described in the introduction to this study, was arrested in the aftermath of the Anschluss, the results were dramatic. Most other cases, however, involved a complicated exchange of paperwork and considerable financial commitments. When Kirstein feared legal complications or other delays at the consulates might prevent the emigration of people dearest to him, he wrote to Messersmith, who tried in some cases to expedite the visa approval process. Messersmith

\footnote{497 See fn 5; Also see Wyman, \textit{Paper Walls}, 28-30; Beller, \textit{A Concise History of Austria}, 231-36.}
also met with Kirstein frequently to offer privileged insights into conditions in Germany and Austria and to help connect the retailer with people who might aid broader public rescue and relief efforts. In the archives that hold Kirstein’s personal and business files at Harvard’s Baker Library, there are well over one thousand documents detailing the retailer’s efforts to help individual refugees, mostly between 1938 and 1941. This study will highlight a handful of cases in which Kirstein intervened, sometimes successfully, to aid the emigration of Jewish relations, friends, and colleagues from the Third Reich after the Anschluss. These cases bring to light how Kirstein leveraged his close connections to Streicher, Messersmith, and other influential retailers and diplomats, to cut through the chaos that enveloped Vienna and Berlin during this critical period. While several cases reveal the depth of Kirstein’s influence in retail and diplomatic circles, others expose the limits that confronted a “private person” working against the tremendous forces of bureaucracy in the State Department and the violence of the Nazi regime. However, that Kirstein had the contacts, resources, and support to intervene at all

499 Kirstein’s involvement in and financial commitments to public relief operations are legion. They include the American Jewish Committee, Associated Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, the United Jewish Appeal, the Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Welfare Board, and the National Refugee Service, among others. See “National Refugee Service Launches Its First Drive for Funds,” JTA, January, 20, 1941; Selekmam, “Louis Edward Kirstein”; “Louis E. Kirstein Dies at 75,” JTA, December 11, 1942; Leon Arkin, “Louis Kirstein,” speech, “Death 1942,” in Box 6, LEK HBL.

500 Curiously the finding aid for Kirstein’s papers gives this archival box a simple title, “Property,” and lists only a few words in the description: “Beach Bluff, 1921, 1 envelope.” Beach Bluff was the name of a property in Beverly, Massachusetts that Kirstein rented for several summers. While the box contains a small folder with several documents pertaining to Beach Bluff, there are also hundreds of documents tucked inside folders organized either by last names of refugees or, more generally as “G-A Refugees” or “G Financial.” More documentation of Kirstein’s efforts is sprinkled throughout files pertaining to Hanns Streicher, George Messersmith, Alan Steyne, and the AMC offices in Berlin and Vienna. See Boxes 8, 28, 54, 80, 81, 82, LEK HBL; The Nazi government closed the German borders to emigration at the end of 1941. See: Wyman, Paper Walls, 191-205.
provides some insight into both the influence and empathy that underpinned the AMC network as Nazism took root across Europe.

Just a few weeks after the *Anschluss*, in April 1938, Louis Kirstein began receiving urgent requests from Austrian Jews eager to leave the country, some of whom he had never met. One woman named Lisolette Chiger, who described herself as the daughter of a manufacturer in Vienna with whom the AMC had contracted for years, wrote to Kirstein begging him to sign an affidavit to sponsor her family for an American visa. Applicants were required by most consular officials in Austria and Germany to provide affidavits proving that a friend or relative in the United States could provide for them financially in the event that they could not find work. For many would-be immigrants, this requirement proved a major barrier to entry in the United States.501 Chiger begged Kirstein: “The situation is so earnest,” she wrote, “that we must ask you to treat this as an SOS service.” Kirstein immediately wired Chiger for more information and wrote to his lawyer to draw up the appropriate papers. Fearful that his tenuous connection to Chiger would undermine the entire process and cause delays, Kirstein called his lawyer directly. “Do you think it would help any to send the whole thing to Messersmith?” Kirstein asked. His lawyer advised against contacting Messersmith in the Chiger case, but it is not surprising that Kirstein asked. Messersmith had already expedited at least three visa applications on behalf of people connected to the AMC.502

502 That figure includes the applications for the Baer nephews, as well as Thea Marsi, an influential Viennese designer who contracted with the AMC (and whose brother was Streicher’s second in command.
Although Messersmith took care never to disclose anything of consequence in writing, after 1938 his correspondence with Kirstein makes clear that he shared privileged insights and connections that might help Jewish refugees. More often than not, Messersmith filled his letters with broad impressions of his opinions: “Far be it for me to be a pessimist,” he wrote of Europe in May 1938, “but I am not at all satisfied that things are going for the better.”

Some letters do, however, offer better insight into the content of their personal meetings. In 1939, for example, Messersmith alluded to recent conversation he had with the former German Chancellor Joseph Wirth, who had been exiled in 1933 for his opposition to the Nazi Party. The diplomat explained that Wirth was “extremely useful in matters connected with Germany, the refugee problem, et. cetera” and added that Wirth wished to meet Kirstein. “I have some interesting things in this connection to tell you,” Messersmith explained, “which I would rather not put in writing.”

Kirstein traveled to Washington, D.C. for a private meeting with Messersmith less than one week later. In correspondence with his nephew, Kirstein often mentioned his dinners with Messersmith, and sometimes expressed surprise at how “freely and frankly” the Assistant Secretary of State talked with him on matters in Germany.

Equally important, however, Messersmith provided Kirstein with personal

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503 GM to LEK, letter, May 11, 1938, “Messersmith, GM,” Box 28, LEK HBL.
504 GM to LEK, letter, March 8, 1939, “Messersmith, GM,” Box 28, LEK HBL.
505 GM to LEK, letter, March 8 & 13 1939, LEK to GM, March 11, 1939, “Messersmith, GM,” Box 28, LEK HBL.
506 Kirstein often referenced confidential conversations with Messersmith in his letters to Alan Steyne, see: LEK to Alan N. Steyne, letter, October 15, 1938, “Alan Steyne, 1932-42,” Box 54, LEK HBL.
introductions to ambassadors and consul generals in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, London, and any other location that Kirstein requested. While Kirstein, in some cases, was already acquainted with the leading diplomats in these cities through the AMC offices, his endorsements from Messersmith ensured the cooperation of these officials with Kirstein’s requests.507

In no case were these diplomatic connections more vital than in that of Kurt Schwartz, the AMC’s German Jewish merchandise buyer who was arrested by Nazi storm troopers in Vienna following the Anschluss. Although the circumstances surrounding Schwartz’s arrest were described in the introduction to this chapter, the details of his rescue reveal more precisely how retailers and diplomats came together, under Kirstein’s direction, to facilitate Schwartz’s release.508 When two merchandise buyers arrived at the AMC’s Paris office with news of Schwartz’s arrest, they enlisted the help of not only the longtime manager of the AMC’s Paris office, Edouard Léon, but also Charles D. Hutzler, owner of the AMC member store Hutzler Brothers of Baltimore.509

507 It is worth noting here that AMC foreign office managers worked regularly with consular officials to keep up to date with international trade policies, tax regulations, and currency exchanges among other things. However, high-ranking consular officials also relied on AMC managers to purchase gifts from local markets on their behalf and probably for additional insight into trade conditions. It is not hard to imagine all that a U.S. diplomat might learn, for example, from the local managers of an American trade office that maintained contracts with dozens of manufacturers distributed throughout the region. And while it is unclear whether Messersmith used the AMC to purchase merchandise in Berlin, his predecessor in Vienna, Minister to Austria, George Howard Earl, did use the AMC. When Messersmith moved to Vienna, he, too, kept up with Streicher’s second in command, Hanns Marss, who was permanently stationed at the AMC office there. See: HS to LEK, letter, February 16, 1934, “Streicher Berlin,” in Box 81; GM to LEK, letter, September 18, 1934, “Messersmith, GM,” Box 28, LEK HBL.

508 All details related to Schwartz’s case in this and the following paragraph are taken from dozens of letters and telegrams included in “Schwartz,” Box 81, LEK HBL and in HS to PJR, letter, May 30, 1938, “Hanns Streicher, Vienna,” Box 82, LEK HBL.

509 At the time, Charles Hutzler was on a tour of the foreign offices of the AMC. His brother, Albert, was then serving on the AMC’s Board of Directors and Foreign Office Committee along with Louis Kirstein.
Hutzler had a good sense of Kirstein’s far-reaching influence and immediately wired him about Schwartz. Upon receipt of Hutzler’s telegram, Kirstein sent urgent messages to officials at the U.S. Embassy in Paris and to Wiley at the U.S. Consulate in Vienna. He also wrote directly to Streicher in Berlin and asked him to personally visit the consulate in Vienna to inform Wiley that, if he could not facilitate Schwartz’s release, Kirstein would call on Messersmith to intervene.

Meanwhile, Hutzler and Léon followed up on Kirstein’s telegrams to the Ambassador’s Secretary in Paris who “dropped everything” when he learned of Kirstein’s personal interest in the case. After a series of coded communications were exchanged between the embassy in Paris and Wiley in Vienna, Nazi authorities released Schwartz on the condition that he leave Austria within the week. Wiley immediately arranged a U.S. visa for Schwartz while another AMC manager in London set up a temporary travel visa to England for Schwartz’s mother. In advance of Schwartz’s arrival in the United States, Kirstein worked with fellow AMC executives at

See: Reilly, *Story of the Retail Research Association and the Associated Merchandising Corporation, 1916-1939* in “AMC Story,” Box 82, LEK HBL.

The official who responded in Paris was Carmel Offie. He was friendly with Louis Kirstein not only because Kirstein was personally acquainted (through Messersmith) with the Ambassador, but also because Offie was friendly with Kirstein’s son, the prominent writer and artist, Lincoln Kirstein. For an example of friendly correspondence between Offie and Kirstein see LEK to Offie, letter, May 27, 1938, in “Schwartz,” Box 81, LEK HBL. For more information about Lincoln Kirstein, as well as some detailed biographical information about Louis Kirstein, see Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*; For more about Offie, see Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 58-67.

Of interest to the larger study is the fact that Schwartz passed through Brussels on his way to the United States and spent time advising AMC buyers there on how to connect with Jewish manufacturers in Austria. See: Edouard Léon to LEK, letter, August 7, 1936, “G-A Refugees, Gotts Chalk,” Box 8, LEK HBL; John C. Wiley was also personally acquainted with Kirstein, and a good friend of his nephew, Alan N. Steyne, who was then working in the American consular office in London. See LEK to Lisolette Chiger, April 14, 1938, “G-A Refugees,” Box 8, LEK HBL; “Also see: Hanns Streicher to Phillip J. O’Reilly, letter, June 3, 1938, “Streicher 1938-1942,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
Bloomingdale’s to ensure that Schwartz would have a job waiting for him in New York City.\(^{512}\) This too, was no easy feat. The American economy had taken another downturn in 1938 and rumors circulated that Jewish retailers intended to dismiss large numbers of cash-strapped American workers and replace them with refugees. No one denied these rumors as loudly as the President of Bloomingdale’s, Michael Schapp, who publicly testified that he had only hired eleven “possible” Jewish refugees. Schwartz was one of eleven.\(^{513}\) “I am convinced,” wrote a grateful friend of Schwartz in a letter to Kirstein, “that no one but yourself, through your friends in the diplomatic service could have accomplished this.”\(^{514}\) That was probably true, and Schwartz was not the only AMC employee who benefitted from Kirstein’s friends in the State Department.

Although Schwartz’s case was unique among those that crossed Kirstein’s desk, archival records indicate that the AMC transferred at least three other Jewish employees from the offices in Berlin and Vienna to member and affiliated stores in the United States.

\(^{512}\) Michael Schapp, President of Bloomingdale’s had been working to raise funds for the relocation of German Jews since 1934, and probably welcomed Schwartz with open arms. Moreover, Schapp and Kirstein were deeply connected in ways both professional and social. The two executives had enjoyed traveling through Europe together to visit the AMC foreign offices in 1934, and Schapp had happily employed Kirstein’s son George ever since. Kirstein also served on two executive boards that oversaw the business of Bloomingdale’s: Federated Department Stores, Inc. and the AMC. Bloomingdale’s was acquired by Federated Department Stores, Inc. in 1929 and joined the AMC in 1930. Kirstein joined the Board of Directors for the Federated Department Stores, Inc. in 1938. See: “Federated Directors Re-elected,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1936, 34; *This is Federated Stores, Inc.* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Federated Dept. Stores, Inc., 1977), 1; O’ Reilly, *Story of the Retail Research Association and the Associated Merchandising Corporation, 1916-1939*, 2; On Michael Schapp: “M. Schapp to Head Businessmen’s Body for Palestine Drive,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, Monday, January 29, 1934, 2; “Jewish Appeal Pays Tribute to Schapp,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1944, 10; “Schapp and Kirstein Sail Abroad, July 4,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, June 25, 1934, 24.


\(^{514}\) Hanns Marss to LEK, letter, May 30, 1938, “Schwartz,” Box 81, LEK HBL.
Messersmith intervened in at least one of these cases, on behalf of Eva Lustig who had worked for thirteen years as a guide for American retail buyers visiting the German markets. In 1935, AMC executives had managed to create a position for Lustig’s brother at the firm’s headquarters in New York. When Kirstein began to “take steps” on Lustig’s behalf, he wrote to Messersmith, who assured him that the case would receive “very careful and sympathetic attention.” From his post in Washington, Messersmith wrote to the Consul General at Berlin with a request to expedite Lustig’s application. Although the Consul General quickly agreed to Messersmith’s request, when he looked further into the case he found that Lustig had never completed a proper visa application, even though she had supplied all the supporting materials. The Consul General at Berlin wrote directly to Kirstein to explain that, without an application, he could do nothing for Lustig. Streicher, however, stepped in not only to help Lustig secure a temporary travel visa to England, but also to connect her personally to retailers in London. By mid-1939 Lustig was on her way to England with a scheduled interview at the London trade office of an AMC-affiliated Australian department store, Myer’s Emporium.

Kirstein also reached out to Messersmith in April 1938 on behalf of a dear friend of his, Julius Marx of Vienna. For years the AMC Vienna office had contracted with

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515 In addition, the AMC created a position for a German Jewish executive at Wertheim’s in Berlin at the personal request of the German retail magnate, Georg Wertheim. See “Weigart,” in “German-Austrian Refugees,” Box 8; Also see HS to LEK, letters, July 16 & August 2, 1938, “Streicher Berlin, 1938-42,” Box 81, LEK HBL. Also see: “Former AMC Accountant Here,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, October 27, 1938, 22.

516 I have yet to find any documents pertaining to Lustig’s case after her departure for England. For details on Lustig’s case, see: “G-A Refugees AMC Lustig,” Box 8, LEK HBL.
Marx, who owned a large shoe factory just outside the city. In the mid-1930s Kirstein and Marx had taken several trips together to the spas in Bad Gastein, Austria, where Kirstein had often encouraged Marx to leave the region—but he refused. Several weeks after the Anschluss, however, Marx departed to a sanatorium in Zurich, from which he cabled Kirstein that he “will not return anymore to Vienna.” Marx requested Kirstein’s help getting to the United States, at least for a few weeks, to determine what he might do next. Kirstein immediately appealed to Messersmith on Marx’s behalf. As was characteristic of Messersmith’s replies, the Assistant Secretary of State cautioned Kirstein that he had no direct authority over the decisions of consular officials. Regardless, Messersmith sent a personal telegram to the Consul General in Zurich attesting to Marx’s character and urging the quick issue of a U.S. travel visa. Despite the fact that Marx had not yet submitted a visa application, the Consul General at Zurich immediately issued a visa for him upon receipt of Messersmith’s telegram. Less than two weeks later, Marx was on a steamship bound for the United States.\footnote{See correspondence and telegrams in “G-A Refugees, J Marx,” Box 8, LEK HBL.} After consulting with Kirstein in Boston, Marx determined to apply for American citizenship and hired a lawyer in Zurich to obtain the appropriate documents for him in Vienna, including a birth certificate. Tragically, after spending several days in pursuit of the birth certificate, Marx’s lawyer informed him that the document could not be secured. Moreover, he advised Marx against pursuing the case any further for fear of reprisals from Nazi authorities against friends and relatives still living in the Third Reich. Doubtful of his prospects for securing American citizenship, Marx departed for Tel Aviv with a personal introduction from Kirstein to a Chancellor at
Hebrew University who would help him get settled. In December 1938, Kirstein wrote to Marx reflecting on the year’s events: “A halt must be called sooner or later,” Kirstein insisted, “or all civilization will be destroyed.”

In order to help his family members escape Germany and Austria, Kirstein relied not only on Messersmith’s interventions but also on the managers at the AMC foreign offices across Europe, especially Streicher. When the violence subsided following the two days of terror in November 1938, known as Kristallnacht, or the Night of the Broken Glass, Streicher trekked past the shattered windows of the capital city to visit the families he had supported for years with the monthly allowances from Kirstein. While Streicher found all the women and their children shaken but uninjured, he learned that at least two men, including Dr. Heymann, had been taken under “protective arrest,” and no one had seen or heard from them. Nor, at least as far as archival records indicate, would they ever see or hear from them again. After Kristallnacht, Streicher dared not communicate important details about the Kirstein relations by mail or telegram to the United States. Instead, he increasingly relied on the manager of the AMC Paris office to relay messages to Kirstein or merely included vague references to visiting the family and finding them well. While several of Kirstein’s relations had filed applications for U.S. or British travel visas before Kristallnacht and Streicher continued to follow up on these applications, some were reluctant to leave their homes. Rosi Bohm, for example, had lost

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518 For details on Marx’s case, see correspondence and telegrams in “Julius Marx,” Box 28; Also see: GM to LEK, letter, May 11, 1938, “Messersmith, GS,” Box 28; LEK to Alan Steyne, letter, April 27, 1938, “Alan Steyne,” Box 54, LEK HBL.
519 William S. Sleap, manager of the AMC office in London remained in regular touch with both Kirstein and the London consulate to help relations and friends who preferred to go to England.
her husband to illness and did not want to leave his possessions and memories behind.\textsuperscript{520} In stark contrast to Bohm, another relation of Kirstein, a young man named Fritz Levi living in Vienna, fled the Third Reich on foot without so much as a hat or a coat. Remarkably, Léon of the AMC Paris office tracked down Levi in Bordeaux weeks later and supplied him with clothing and money from Kirstein’s funds. He also helped the young Levi and his parents, still in Vienna, begin the visa application process from consulates in France and Austria.\textsuperscript{521}

Between 1938 and 1940, Kirstein intervened in ways both large and small on behalf of refugees whom he knew personally or who were connected to friends or fellow retailers. With the help of another personal note from Messersmith, Kirstein aided the emigration of Dr. Heymann’s wife, mother-in-law, and two daughters, who settled permanently in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{522} And with the help of Streicher, his staff in Vienna, and Léon in Paris, Kirstein also located and passed along information to friends in Boston eager to learn about the circumstances of relations with whom they had lost touch. In one case, Streicher sent a trusted merchandise buyer out to interview a cousin of Dr. Paul Sachs of Harvard University and relayed the horrendous news that the family’s photography business in Vienna had been placed under the control of a Nazi commissar and that the patriarch was facing trial for misusing his passport. For Sachs, the

\textsuperscript{520} HS to LEK, letter, June 2, 1937, “Streicher Berlin,” Box 81, LEK HBL.

\textsuperscript{521} In all the correspondence Kirstein saved detailing the rescue and relief of his relations, I have not found any references to Dr. Heymann dated later than November 1938. Also see: Miss Beverly to Julia Mannheimer, letter, Dec 3, 1938, “G-A Refugees Miscellaneous,” Box 8; Julia Mannheimer to Miss Beverly, letter, November 29, 1938 “G-A Refugees Miscellaneous,” Box 8; Edouard Léon to LEK, letter, November 16, 1938, “G Financial,” Box 8, LEK HBL.

\textsuperscript{522} See correspondence and memos in “Heymann,” Box 8, LEK HBL.
information was vital and enabled him to begin the work of passing financial and legal aid on to his cousin.\textsuperscript{523} Kirstein also found a position at the AMC headquarters in New York City for the last employee classified as a “non-Aryan” still working at one of Berlin’s most successful Jewish-owned department stores, Wertheim’s.\textsuperscript{524} Kirstein also helped, if he could, in smaller, but meaningful ways on behalf of refugees who arrived in Boston, as in the case of a skilled leather glove maker whom he personally introduced to a Filene’s glove buyer.\textsuperscript{525} After 1940, however, it became much harder to for Kirstein to intervene personally in cases that involved emigration from Germany.

In 1941 widespread fears about the presence of fifth columnists among the ranks of refugees entering the United States prompted the State Department to pass more restrictive guidelines for visa approvals. At the age of seventy-three, Kirstein was deemed too old to sign affidavits to sponsor immigrant visas.\textsuperscript{526} In the midst of these policy changes, Ilse Sternberg, whom Kirstein had supported financially through the AMC office in Berlin for more than a decade, decided at last that she was ready to leave her home in Germany. “We still love our Fatherland,” she wrote to Kirstein, “but we want to live and see what the future has in store for us.” Sternberg specifically requested a temporary pass that would allow her to return to Germany “at will.” Kirstein again appealed to Messersmith who had by then left Washington to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Cuba in Havana. Although Sternberg’s case was too complicated, and the

\textsuperscript{523} See correspondence and memos in “Sachs/Schostal,” Box 8, LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{524} See correspondence and memos in “Weigart/Wertheim,” Box 8, LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{525} Lottie Bergas to LEK, letter, February 8, 1939; LEK to Dr. Blumgart, letter, February 7, 1939; Dr. Blumgart to LEK, letter, February 8, 1939, “G-A Refugees, Miscellaneous,” Box 8, LEK HBL.
\textsuperscript{526} See Wyman, \textit{Paper Walls}, 191-205.
backup at the U.S. consuls in Germany too overwhelming, to arrange a U.S. visa, Messersmith used his influence to secure permits for Sternberg to travel to Cuba—but it was too late. Germany’s borders closed to emigration before Sternberg could secure passage aboard a steamship to Cuba. Thirty-five years later, in 1974, Dr. Heymann’s daughter, who became a U.S. citizen, filed a report with the Council of Post-War Jewish Organizations in her adopted hometown of Los Angeles. According to Heymann’s report, Sternberg was deported to an unknown concentration camp sometime in 1942, shortly after the German borders closed.  

When Germany declared war on the United States in December 1941 the AMC cut all ties with its trade office in Berlin, the last point of access Kirstein had into the Third Reich. AMC executives had voted to close the Vienna office in early 1939, and one year later the Paris office was disbanded during the German invasion of France. Although the AMC managed to bring Léon from the Paris office to the United States in 1941, all contact with Streicher, who became an enemy alien almost overnight, was lost.  

Messersmith’s ascent in the Foreign Service took him further and further from the European theater after 1940, and he spent the rest of his career in Central and South America. Kirstein continued to advocate for refugees by contributing substantial funds

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527 For details re: Ilse Sternberg’s case, see references in “Hanns Streicher, 1938-42,” Box 81, but especially “Sternberg,” Box 8, LEK HBL; Also see Ilse Sternberg, record in SHOAH database, Yad Veshim; Wyman, Paper Walls, 191-205.

528 Hanns Streicher and his wife moved back to Austria and survived the war. Streicher returned to work for the AMC in 1947 and remained a manager of trade in Central Europe until he retired in 1964. See: “Vienna Office is Reopened by the AMC,” Women’s Wear Daily, June 9, 1937, 2; “AMC Names Two Managers Abroad,” Women’s Wear Daily, July 27, 1964, 3; “Leon, Paris AMC Head Due June 1,” Women’s Wear Daily, May 21, 1941, 2.
and leadership to major Jewish organizations immersed in redressing the refugee crisis. However, in 1942 Kirstein’s health began to fail and, at the age of seventy-five, he succumbed to pneumonia. In a tribute published in the Boston Globe, Kirstein’s longtime friend and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter remarked that with his passing “a deep well of rare goodness has suddenly dried.”

It was a fact well known to many who knew Kirstein, and especially to those whom he tried to shield from the terror of the Third Reich.

**Ira Hirschmann’s Path to the War Refugee Board**

During the summer of 1943, Ira Hirschmann was in his office at Bloomingdale’s, where he had served as Vice President and Director of Advertising and Sales since 1938, when he received a visit from Peter Bergson, head of The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe (EC). Bergson, a Lithuanian Jew who had spent much of his life in Palestine, arrived in the United States in 1940 and since then had founded a number of groups devoted to the rescue of Jewish refugees. A friend suggested that Bergson visit Hirschmann after he learned that the *New York Times* could no longer provide the advertising space that the EC desperately needed to promote its vital mission. Within minutes of meeting Bergson in his office, Hirschmann called the advertising

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530 Peter Bergson was born Hillel Kook, but went by the pseudonym “Peter Bergson” during his time in the United States. Given the fact this chapter is focused on Kook’s time in the United States I have elected to use his pseudonym in the narrative.
department at the *Times* and asked them to transfer a portion of Bloomingdale’s’ advertising contract over to the EC. As Bergson later recounted, Hirschmann “showed such interest in the work of the EC that I suggested he become Vice President.”

Hirschmann accepted the invitation, and so began a new phase in the retailer’s decade-long campaign to oppose the Nazi Party and aid Europe’s refugees. Six months later, Hirschmann was en route to Ankara, Turkey with an appointment to serve as the first special attaché to the War Refugee Board (WRB).531

Although several studies have covered Hirschmann’s refugee work in extensive detail, his status as a retailer has only merited passing mention and inspired a handful of amusing anecdotes sprinkled here and there.532 Yet, as a leading American retailer Hirschmann had privileged access to trade centers in Europe, a platform to advance his views on Nazism and the plight of refugees, and connections to a great many influential people, especially to American Jews with close ties to the Roosevelt Administration.

Among Hirschmann’s most important contacts were Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who facilitated his attendance at the 1938 Evian Conference on the Refugee Crisis, and Kirstein, who brought Hirschmann into the fold of the AMC network and facilitated his appointment to the National War Labor Board in 1942. When Hirschmann forced his way onto the nascent WRB in 1943 he was not unknown to the State Department officials who approved his appointment. To the contrary, Hirschmann’s

531 For quotes from Bergson and for details about Berson’s visit to Hirschmann at Bloomingdale’s see: M. J. Nurenberger Interview with Hillell Kook in Israel July 1, 1971 recorded in Medoff, *Blowing the Whistle on Genocide*, 83-84.

532 See fn 10 for a list of significant literature in which Ira Hirschmann plays a role. Charles King makes the most of Hirschmann’s background as a retailer, but mostly to add levity to his text, referring to Hirschmann as a “Bloomie’s exec.” See King, *Midnight at the Pera Palace*, 324-29.
appointment to the WRB marked the culmination of more than ten years of opposition to Nazism that grew out of his experiences, political connections, and leadership in the retail industry. Far from incidental to his WRB appointment, Hirschmann’s unique position as an influential American Jewish retailer made it possible.

Despite showing little promise in his youth, Hirschmann gained a foothold in the retail industry as a young man in 1922 by way of Jewish philanthropy. As the sixth of seven children born to A.B. Hirschmann, a Latvian Jewish immigrant and a prosperous merchant and banker in Baltimore, Hirschmann would always remember feeling that he grew up “in a kind of child’s no-man’s land.”533 Although his father tried to steer him through a proper business education, he had no interest in the family’s clothing store, pulled pranks throughout high school, and eventually dropped out of Johns Hopkins University. Hirschmann’s first break came when he was twenty-one years old and invited to follow his brother-in-law to Newark to help run a fundraising campaign for the Joint Jewish Relief Committee. When a family illness forced his brother-in-law to drop his leadership role in the campaign, Hirschmann took over the planning for a high profile gala event. He transformed the evening by introducing dramatic musical performances and special lighting alongside the keynote address given by the celebrated Rabbi Stephen Wise. The chairman of the campaign, Felix Fuld, was so impressed that he offered Hirschmann an entry-level position in the merchandising department at the AMC member store he owned, Bamberger’s of Newark. Within just a few years Hirschmann

533 Hirschmann, Caution to the Winds, 8.
would become Bamberger’s Director of Advertising. In 1928 the young executive collaborated for the first time with Kirstein on publicity campaigns for the AMC’s Paris office and on a scholarship program for students through Filene’s of Boston. By 1931, however, Hirschmann had developed a reputation as an innovator in retail publicity and advertising, and he left the AMC network to accept a new executive post at Lord & Taylor in New York City.

Although Jewish social and philanthropic connections helped Hirschmann start his career in retail, he later wrote that he did not consider himself Jewish in any meaningful way until Lord & Taylor sent him on a six-week tour of Europe in June 1933. Hirschmann had played a leading role in the planning of a national retail campaign to drive up retail sales during the worst years of the Great Depression. The purpose of the National Quality Movement, which had earned the endorsement of President Herbert Hoover in December 1932, was to convince shoppers that buying higher quality, higher priced merchandise offered better overall savings than buying only bargain basement goods at slashed prices. Hirschmann drafted slogans for the campaign, such as “Quality is Thrift!” or “Price with Profit,” and in June 1933 he traveled to Europe to study and

\[535\] See correspondence between LEK and Ira Hirschmann March – July, 1928, “Bambergers,” Box 82, LEK HBL.
\[536\] After the death of Bamberger’s charismatic owner, Felix Fuld, R. H. Macy’s purchased the firm. Macy’s had long been considered a chief rival of Bamberger’s and Hirschmann was disenchanted with the changes at the firm. See: “Named Publicity Director,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1931, 34; Hirschmann, *Caution to the Winds*, 37; “Credit Policy of Bamberger to be Continue by R. H. Macy,” *WWD*, July 1 1929, 1, 20; “I. A. Hirschmann New Publicity Head,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, July 17, 1931, 1.
\[537\] Hirschmann had begun speaking widely on this subject in 1932, see: “We Are Trading America Down,’ Asserts Ira Hirschmann,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, April 20, 1932, 1.
compare the quality of European and American merchandise. The tour included several stops in Germany, but Hirschmann refused to travel beyond Berlin after witnessing a Nazi Party rally at which Adolf Hitler was the keynote speaker. As Hirschmann retells the story in his 1962 memoir *Caution to the Winds*, what frightened him most about the event was Hitler’s “magnetic” hold on the audience as he “spewed forth his hatred” of Jews. Their eyes, as he remembered, were “fired with hate… their fists clenched.” He left the meeting hall for fear of his own safety. The experience, as he remembered it, forced upon him a new awareness of himself as a Jew. Prior to that trip, Hirschmann considered himself a mere “spectator,” of his Jewish background—he was neither religious, nor moved by the dream of a Jewish state. However, “to see Hitler and to hear Hitler… it hit me hard,” Hirschmann recalled. “He was talking about me.”

Though he continued to travel to Europe annually for business, Hirschmann did not visit Germany again until after the Second World War.

Ira Hirschmann returned from his 1933 European trip “fighting mad” about what he had witnessed in Germany and he was determined to let Americans know it. When

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539 In *Caution to the Winds* and in an interview he gave in 1979 Hirschmann describes this encounter as happening in 1932, but his memory did not serve him well. The executive also spends a page of his memoir describing the report he gave to the *New York Times* upon his arrival in New York City. This article appeared in the *New York Times* following Hirschmann’s trip to Europe in 1933. See *Caution to the Winds*, 38-44; Medoff, *Blowing the Whistle*, 115; “I.A. Hirschmann Back, Tells of Nazi Myth,” *NYT*, July 28, 1933, 7.

his steamship docked in New York City news reporters climbed aboard eager to hear his thoughts on trade conditions across Europe. Instead Hirschmann sounded an alarm bell about the rise of the Nazi Party. Germany was “a mad house,” he told reporters. Its leadership was “emotional, negative, destructive, and combustible to an incredible degree.” He described German citizens as being “in a state of bewilderment, terror, and nervous tension.” Hirschmann argued that any American who celebrated the “carefully shown exterior peacefulness” of Germany “permits themselves to be deliberately fooled.”

His accusations were so strong that that Adolf Ochs, the owner of the *New York Times* called him after the story had run to caution against expressing such “intemperate and extreme views” in the future. But Hirschmann pressed on. Two days later he used even stronger language in an interview with the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*:

“The Nazis are bent on a mass sadistic orgy; their bloodthirsty crimes are committed in the dead of night and Germany is paralyzed with fright.” The best way to eradicate “the Hitler menace,” he told the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, was to support the boycott of German goods. Hirschmann alleged that plenty of American businesses were buying goods in Germany and encouraged American Jews to “take pains to discover who these concerns are and refuse to buy their merchandise.”

Although the first calls to boycott German merchandise had come months earlier in March 1933 from the leaders of the

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542 Hirschmann, *Caution to the Winds*, 44.
543 Hirschmann’s interviews with the *New York Times* and the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* are all the more remarkable when compared with the interviews he gave about Germany when he returned from his trip to Europe in 1932, in which he “expressed keen admiration for the organizing abilities of Herr Hitler,” and the Nazi Party’s effective propaganda machine: “No matter where I went… I saw Hitler cigarettes, Hitler magazines, and Hitler uniforms… He is the master artist of propaganda.” See: “Sees Hitler in Power in Nine Months,” *NYT*, August 20, 1932, 4; “Nazi Anti-Jew Hate Still at White-Heat,” *JTA*, July 30, 1933.
militant Jewish War Veterans, Hirschmann became the first and most vocal American retailer to support the anti-Nazi boycotts, and he regularly used his influence to support the movement.

In September 1933 Hirschmann gave a bold pro-boycott speech at the Boston Conference on Retail Distribution, a large gathering of retailers from across the country, which attracted widespread attention. Although Hirschmann had been slated to speak about the National Quality Movement he used the platform as an opportunity to criticize industry leaders for discussing the German situation only in “hushed tones.” According to the publisher of Women’s Wear Daily who attended the event, Hirschmann spoke “with feeling” as he called for frank and open discussion of the boycott. “We must definitively and courageously cease from buying goods from Germany,” he declared. Hirschmann’s speech stole newspaper headlines from the keynote speaker, the celebrated H. Gordon Selfridge, who gave a highly anticipated radio address from his successful flagship building on London’s Oxford Street. It even surpassed coverage of retailers’ discussions of the National Recovery Act, which had recently mandated a series of controversial codes aimed at raising wages and lowering prices across the industry.\footnote{544} Over the next several months, Hirschmann worked tirelessly to oppose the Nazi regime in the press and publicly committed Lord & Taylor to upholding the boycott despite opposition from other executives at the firm.\footnote{545} He was even invited to contribute an essay to a powerful

\footnote{544} “Retail Men Urged to Ban Nazi Goods,” NYT, September 19, 1933, 12; Fairchild, “The Big Retail Show,” 24.
\footnote{545} Hirschmann describes the opposition in his memoir, but the disagreement also played out in the press. See Hirschmann, Caution to the Winds, 49-50; See previous chapter for more details on the disagreement between Hirschmann and Lord & Taylor executives.
edited collection titled *Nazism: An Assault on Civilization*, which was heavily promoted by the *New York Times*. In *Nazism*, Hirschmann’s writing appeared alongside essays by Dorothy Thompson, who was expelled from Germany for her criticism of Hitler in 1934, Senator Robert F. Wagner, Rabbi Stephen Wise, and the former governor of New York Alfred E. Smith.\(^{546}\) Perhaps most importantly, however, the young retailer’s speech at the Boston Conference caught the attention of future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who was then teaching law at Harvard University. After reading Hirschmann’s speech reprinted on the front page of the *Boston Transcript*, Frankfurter invited Hirschmann to his home on Brattle Street in Cambridge for tea.

Over the ensuing decade Frankfurter would become one of Hirschmann’s most influential allies in his opposition to Nazism, and, increasingly, in his efforts to aid refugees. Born in Vienna’s Jewish Quarter in 1882, Frankfurter moved to the United States with his family at the age of twelve, quickly learned English, and distinguished himself at Harvard Law School where he went on to teach for more than thirty years. He served as Judge Advocate under Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson during the First World War and later helped to found the American Civil Liberties Union. In 1939 President Roosevelt nominated him to the Supreme Court. When Frankfurter called Hirschmann to tea in 1933 the law professor was already considered one of the most influential economic and legal advisors to Roosevelt. Although Frankfurter had turned

down Roosevelt’s request to appoint him Solicitor General in favor of accepting a visiting professorship at Oxford University, he remained engaged with the administration and in active in Jewish affairs, especially regarding the impending refugee crisis.\footnote{Frankfurter’s correspondence with Louis Kirstein reveals the extent to which the two consulted each other on matters in Washing and on concerns related to Jewish refugees. For a sample, see: LEK to Frankfurter, letters, October 25, November 28, December 13, 1933, January 15, February 8, June 12, 1934; Frankfurter to LEK, letters, September 28, November 17, December 19, 1933, January 25, May 15 in “Frankfurter,” Box 24, LEK HBL. For an overview of Frankfurter’s life and work, see Felix Frankfurter and Harlan B. Phillips, \textit{Felix Frankfurter: Reminiscences} (New York, New York: Reynal & Company, 1960) 243-247; Michael E. Parrish, \textit{Felix Frankfurter and His Times: The Reform Years} (New York, New York, The Free Press, 1982) 5-22, 197-237; Paul A. Freund, “Felix Frankfurter (1882-1865),” \textit{American Jewish Yearbook} 67 (1966): 31-36.} Frankfurter had been impressed by Hirschmann’s political courage and implored him to take on a formal leadership role in a traditional Jewish organization. He even arranged for Hirschmann to meet his trusted friend and mentor, Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, who again tried to persuade the retailer of the importance of Zionism and organized leadership.\footnote{Despite his near constant activity in Jewish affairs, Hirschmann never joined the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, or any other major American Jewish organization. As Hirschmann wrote in his 1962 memoir, he did not believe these organizations were well suited to respond to the refugee crisis: “But, while I was intent on bending my energies toward all means of awakening Americans to the realities of Hitler’s evil aims and to combat them wherever possible, I was not convinced that membership in Jewish organizations constituted the best way for me. I feared the dissipation of energies in working through traditional organizations designed for other than emergency activities. A crisis was impending. A frontal attack with a new set of rules, or possibly no rules, was called for.” See Hirschmann, \textit{Caution to the Winds}, 48-53.} Hirschmann never joined any traditional Jewish organization, but he did follow Frankfurter’s suggestion to join the board of the University in Exile, which worked to bring Jewish and liberal intellectuals exiled from Nazi Germany—Albert Einstein among them—to the United States.\footnote{Frankfurter felt very strongly about the importance of the University in Exile and even tried to get his friend Louis Kirstein involved in 1935. In a letter to Kirstein, Frankfurter described the University as a “cause about which I care more than I have ever cared about a cause, both for its own sake and for what it symbolizes.” See Felix Frankfurter to LEK, letter, March 26, 1935, “Frankfurter,” Box 24, LEK HBL; Hirschmann, \textit{Caution to the Winds}, 78-82.} Hirschmann went on to chair the
board of the University in Exile from 1935 to 1937 and oversaw a capital campaign designed to make the University a permanent institution. The laudable work of the University earned praise from Roosevelt, who hailed it as a “symbol of American freedom.”

While he oversaw the growth of the University in Exile alongside Frankfurter, Hirschmann cemented his reputation as one of the country’s most influential retailers and as a valued commentator on trade and politics in both the United States and Europe. In 1935, when Hirschmann was still just thirty-four years old, the prestigious firm of Saks Fifth Avenue recruited him to serve as Vice President “with unrestricted duties.” When he accepted the appointment *Women’s Wear Daily* celebrated Hirschmann’s ascent in the retail industry as “meteoric.” Although Hirschmann would later admit that he never fully adjusted to the “high-style” culture of Saks, which he described as “retailing based on snob appeal,” the appointment afforded him tremendous travel opportunities and even greater influence. As part of his contract with Saks, Hirschmann spent at least six weeks in Europe every summer. During these trips he cultivated a taste for classical music, which he brought back to Saks both through radio and live performances, and oversaw the expansion of the store’s trade in ski fashions and equipment produced in Austria, Switzerland, and France.

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552 See previous chapter for context on the influence of Austria and Switzerland and skiing. Also, see Hirschmann, *Caution to the Winds*, 86; For the connection between Hirschmann’s publicity work and skiing, see: “Telephoto is Used as Commercial Aid,” *NYT*, January 10, 1936, 41.
New York each summer, eager to print his observations about political and market
stability in Europe. He was also appointed to the executive board of the Retail Dry Goods
Association of New York and gave a series of speeches advising retailers how to handle
the economic downturn of 1937-38. Hirschmann continued to use his influence to
oppose the influences of Nazism in American life in unconventional ways. In 1936, for
example, he formed an ad hoc committee to oppose the New York Philharmonic
Symphony’s decision to appoint a German conductor as its musical director. Support for
Hirschmann’s committee grew so quickly that the German appointee stepped down less
than one week later.

With the help of Frankfurter, Hirschmann transformed his 1938 trip to Europe for
Saks into a diplomatic and humanitarian mission aimed at alleviating the refugee crisis,
which had drastically worsened following the German invasion of Austria. Frankfurter
arranged a diplomatic passport and proper credentials for Hirschmann to attend an
important worldwide conference on the refugee crisis at Evian, France in July. At the
invitation of President Roosevelt, delegates from thirty-two countries gathered in Evian

553 “Retailers Choose Executive Group,” NYT, March 4, 1937, 42; “Franc Devaluation Seen by
Hirschmann,” NYT, July 22, 1936, 28; “Foreign Supplies Cut: Store Official Found that Unrest Has
Contracted Markets,” NYT, August 2, 1936, F8; “Proper Sales Timing Urged by Hirschmann,” June 25,
1937, 40; “Heard No Talk of War: Hirschmann Back from Europe,” NYT, August 12, 1937, 10; “Merchants
Urged to Abandon Fears,” NYT, October 1, 1937, 65; Returning Retailers Find Cheer Here and Abroad,”
Women’s Wear Daily, August 12, 1937, 4; Also see dozens of articles detailing Hirschmann’s talks on
price, quality, and economy to retailers across the country in 1935-1937 in Women’s Wear Daily.
554 “To Fight Furtwaengler,” NYT, March 9, 1936, 21; “Furtwaengler Declines Post Here; Will Not Mix
Music and Politics,” NYT, March 15, 1936, 1; I.A. Hirschmann, letter to the editor, NYT, March 17, 1936,
20; Also see: Hirschmann, Caution to the Winds, 94-100.
555 Hirschmann attended not as a delegate representing the United States but as an official observer to the
conference. Hirschmann credits Frankfurter with securing the diplomatic passport in his memoir, Caution
to the Winds, 101.
to discuss global strategies for facilitating the emigration of refugees from the Third Reich, as well as to form a new international organization to address the deepening crisis. Hirschmann was among the many delegates and reporters who considered the conference a failure because no nation agreed to take in more refugees.\textsuperscript{556} In his 1946 book, \textit{Life Line To A Promised Land}, which details his experiences on the WRB, Hirschmann recalled critically that it took only a few days for the Evian conference to “run up a blind alley.” He charged the delegates with “shedding crocodile tears over their inability to accept refugees,” all while attending festive banquets.\textsuperscript{557} Yet, if the delegates at the Evian Conference accomplished little, Hirschmann accomplished much after he departed from France and traveled to Austria in the company of George Brandt, one of the diplomats who had officially represented the United States at Evian.\textsuperscript{558}

Although Hirschmann had visited the U.S. Consulate in Vienna during his previous trips to Austria, in 1938 he was armed with a diplomatic passport and accompanied by Brandt.\textsuperscript{559} Hirschmann entered the consulate without an appointment

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\textsuperscript{556} Apart from establishing the Intergovernmental Committee of Refugees, contemporaries and historians alike have deemed the conference a failure. According to the historian David Wyman, “the bulk of informed opinion agreed that the Evian Conference had failed almost completely in its major task, that of finding places to which refugees could go.” See Wyman, \textit{Paper Walls}, 43, 51.

\textsuperscript{557} Hirschmann, \textit{Life Line}, 14. Some of the same criticisms reappear in \textit{Caution to the Winds} (pp. 103).

\textsuperscript{558} This connection to Brandt is interesting because in 1943 Brandt was executive assistant to then Special Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, the man who would ultimately approve Hirschmann’s trip to Turkey. Regarding the appointment of Breckinridge Long, see: Breitman and Kraut, \textit{American Refugee Policy}, 128. Also: Hirschmann seems to have misremembered Brandt’s title at the time in \textit{Caution to the Winds}. For Brandt’s title during that trip to Europe, see: “Brandt Opens Talk with Reich Officials,” \textit{JTA}, July 29, 1938, 2.

\textsuperscript{559} In \textit{Caution to the Winds}, Hirschmann writes about an encounter with George S. Mesersmith at the Vienna Consulate in 1938, but Messersmith was not there in 1938—he was back in Washington serving as Assistant Secretary of State. More likely, Hirschmann’s encounter with Messersmith happened during a previous trip to Vienna. See Hirschmann, \textit{Caution to the Winds}, 103-104. Also see George Messersmith correspondence during this period, which suggests he was in Washington: Folder 65, Box 9, GM UD.
and easily expedited visa applications concerning his wife’s family members who were still in the country. During his time at the consulate Hirschmann met Messersmith’s beleaguered successor, Consul General Wiley, who had remarked that, amid the crisis of 1938, the “instinct to do something for everybody [was] overwhelming.”

Hirschmann, too, was horrified by the large crowds of Viennese Jews filling two or three blocks around the consular office, all of them hoping for a chance to emigrate. Unlike Wiley, however, he was under no obligation to uphold the restrictive immigration policies of the U.S. State Department. Although he could not approve visas or expedite applications for people he did not know, Hirschmann could and did help countless refugees lacking financial sponsors in the United States. After guzzling six pilsners at the hotel bar, Hirschmann spent a full day signing affidavits to sponsor countless Austrian Jewish refugees whom he had never met, and would never meet again.

“I was struck,” he later wrote in his memoir, “by the cruel incongruity of so many lives depending on slips of paper.” An official State Department memorandum listing Hirschmann’s qualifications for an appointment to the WRB in 1944 reports that the retailer “cooperated with friends in Austria and arranged for several hundred refugees to leave the country.”

Later in life, Hirschmann took great pride in reporting that not one of the hundreds of refugees he helped ever required his financial assistance, though several did seek him out to thank him.

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560 John C. Wiley to GM, letter, June 8, 1938 “109 1004,” GM UD.
Hirschmann’s 1938 trip to Europe for Saks not only gave him the opportunity to personally intervene on behalf of hundreds of refugees, it also brought him back into the fold of the politically connected AMC network. Although Hirschmann had known Kirstein since his work at Bamberger’s in the 1920s, he had spent most of the 1930s working as an executive at stores un-affiliated with the AMC, namely Lord & Taylor and Saks. However, while working in Saks’ Paris office in 1938 Hirschmann had a chance encounter with Kirstein. In his memoir Hirschmann describes their conversation as focused almost entirely on the troubles facing Bloomingdale’s, which Kirstein believed was not living up to its potential.\footnote{563} It is hard to imagine, however, that two men so deeply entrenched in refugee advocacy did not also discuss the circumstances facing Jews in Vienna and throughout the Third Reich. After all, part of Kirstein’s purpose in traveling to Paris was to work with Hanns Streicher on a plan to close the AMC’s Vienna trade office by the end of the year, and Hirschmann had only just returned from that city. As Hirschmann remembered it, Kirstein offered him a new position as director of advertising and publicity at Bloomingdale’s before they left Paris. Indeed, Hirschmann abruptly resigned from his position at Saks upon his return to New York City, seemingly to the surprise of the firm’s president who had not yet chosen Hirschmann’s replacement by the time reporters caught wind of the news.\footnote{564} A few weeks later, Hirschmann accepted a new post as Vice President at Bloomingdale’s and began working under the

\footnote{563}{In addition to his executive role in the AMC, Kirstein was also on the board of directors for Bloomingdale’s. Hirschmann describes his encounter with Kirstein in some detail in \textit{Caution to the Winds} (107-108).}

\footnote{564}{“Hirschmann resigns from Saks Fifth Avenue,” \textit{Women’s Wear Daily}, September 29, 1; “Store Official Resigns: I. A. Hirschmann Leaves Post at Saks Fifth Avenue,” \textit{NYT}, September 30, 1938, 39.}
supervision of Michael Schaap—the very same executive who happily employed the AMC’s Schwartz upon his release from a Nazi prison in Vienna. 565

As an executive in the AMC network in 1939 Hirschmann became the beneficiary of a longstanding friendship between Frankfurter and Kirstein, both of whom wielded considerable political influence and remained committed to redressing the refugee crisis. 566 Frankfurter and Kirstein met during the First World War when they both worked in different capacities under the Secretary of War Henry Stimson. 567 The two remained friendly and when Kirstein accepted several appointments to oversee agencies created under the National Recovery Act in 1933 he corresponded frequently with Frankfurter to debate the progress of Roosevelt’s programs and the merits of his political appointees, especially those who might have some influence on the refugee question, such as Messersmith and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau. 568 During his trip to Europe in 1938 Kirstein wrote to Frankfurter: “I have met some of our people (AMC employees) who are very extraordinary and who have been victims of Austrian and German rule… the courage they have displayed is remarkable. I will tell you more when I

565 “Hirschmann Bloomingdale Ad, Sales Head,” Women’s Wear Daily, November 2, 1938, 1.
566 A brief look at the Frankfurter-Kirstein correspondence reveals that both were paying keen attention to the progress of various responses to the crisis, both large and small. For example, when Kirstein received a private donation of $1,000 from Mrs. Storrow (wife of James J. Storrow, wealthy investment banker of Boston) to be directed toward specifically deserving refugee cases, he appealed to Frankfurter for advice on how to use the money. “Was wondering if you don’t feel we should give it to a number of people, not just a few – say ten or a dozen- so if you have anybody in mind, let me know when it comes to your attention.” LEK to Frankfurter, letter, March 18, 1939, “Frankfurter Supreme Court,” Box 24, LEK HBL.
567 Frankfurter as a Judge Advocate and Kirstein as Chairman of the Board of Control for Labor Standards, which oversaw supplies contracts for the U.S. Army.
568 Kirstein’s appointments included Chairman of the Industrial Advisory Board, and a member of both the National Labor Board and the Retail Code Authority. For a sampling of letters exchanged between Frankfurter and Kirstein during this period, see: LEK to Frankfurter, letters, October 25, November 28, December 13, 1933, January 15, February 8, June 12, 1934; Frankfurter to LEK, letters, September 28, November 17, December 19, 1933, January 25, May 15, “Frankfurter,” Box 24, LEK HBL.
Frankfurter was well acquainted the foreign offices of the AMC not only because of his friendship with Kirstein, but also because he coordinated his trips to England through the AMC office in London; staff there arranged his travel and hotel accommodations, received his mail, and provided banking services. In 1939 both Frankfurter and Kirstein were at the height of their political influence: the former had accepted Roosevelt’s appointment to serve on the Supreme Court and the latter had become one of the president’s foremost advisors on matters relating to economy and the retail industry.

Between 1939 and 1942 Hirschmann began working again with U.S. diplomats and spending more time in Washington, largely due to the influence of Frankfurter and Kirstein. After German forces advanced through Czechoslovakia in 1939, Kirstein undertook new initiatives alongside AMC foreign office managers to develop trade markets east of German territory, including in Estonia and Latvia. When Wiley, the former Consul General at Berlin who had subsequently been appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to both Estonia and Latvia, arrived in Washington unexpectedly, Frankfurter immediately wired Kirstein to come to Washington. Kirstein was unable to

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569 LEK to Frankfurter, July 26, 1938, “Frankfurter,” Box 24, LEK HBL.
570 W. S. Sleap to LEK, letters, June 20, July 18, 1939; LEK to Marion Frankfurter, July 27, 1939, “Frankfurter Supreme Court,” Box 24, LEK HBL.
571 To get a sense of Kirstein’s activity in Washington and connection to Roosevelt, see: President’s Personal Files, 7668 and President Official Files, 3988, FDRL. That year, Kirstein even managed to persuade Roosevelt to give the keynote address at the annual meeting of the American Retail Federation, which represented the interests of more than one million retailers in Washington. Kirstein was the major force behind the formation of the American Retail Federation. See President’s Personal Files 3988, FDRL; Also, see: Roosevelt, “A Positive Fiscal Program,” speech given at American Retail Federation Annual Meeting, May 22, 1939, in Master Speech Files, Series 2, Reel 16, FDRL. Also see: “American Retail Federation Will Be ‘Open for Business’ Monday, Says Louis Kirstein,” Women’s Wear Daily, April 17, 1935, 1; “Merchants of the Nation Organize to Act as Unit on Economic Issues,” NYT, April 17, 1935, 1.
make the trip on short notice so Frankfurter suggested that Hirschmann meet Wiley instead. Hirschmann negotiated on behalf of Kirstein in his discussions with Wiley over new terms for trade in Latvian and Estonian markets; he was looking for replacement merchandise in lines formerly sourced in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, such as wooden toys, novelties, costumes, and jewelry. Hirschmann also oversaw Wiley’s meetings with Léon of the AMC’s Paris office to begin the purchasing process.572 Kirstein must have been impressed with Hirschmann’s work because in 1942 he helped the Bloomingdale’s executive receive an appointment to serve as special investigator to the newly formed National War Labor Board. Several years earlier, President Roosevelt had appointed Kirstein to serve on the NRA’s Industrial Advisory Board, and in 1942 he appointed Kirstein’s son George to head the National War Labor Board. Not coincidentally, George Kirstein was also an executive at Bloomingdale’s and he knew Hirschmann well. Throughout 1942 Hirschmann spent considerable time in Washington negotiating agreements to prevent strikes and work stoppages in the steel industry that might disrupt the wartime production.573 From his office at the Supreme Court in Washington Frankfurter kept Kirstein updated on Hirschmann’s “extraordinary” work with the National War Labor Board.574

When Bergson of the EC visited Hirschmann at his Bloomingdale’s office in 1943 he was likely aware that the retailer’s influence extended well beyond the firm’s flagship

572 Hirschmann to Leon, letter, April 19, 1939; Frankfurter and LEK, telegrams, April 17, 1939; LEK to Frankfurter, September 6, 1938, “Frankfurter,” LEK to FF, letter, Friday n.d. 1938, Box 24, LEK HBL.
574 Frankfurter to LEK, letter, May 2, 1942, “Frankfurter Supreme Court,” Box 24, LEK HBL.
store. “For us,” Bergson told an interviewer in 1971, “the Vice President of Bloomingdale’s was a very big deal.\textsuperscript{575} When the two began petitioning the State Department to send an envoy to Ankara, Turkey charged with helping refugees, Hirschmann volunteered to act as the envoy himself. However, Special Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long laughed at the proposal during his first meeting with Hirschmann. Indeed, Long had developed a reputation for obstructing efforts to alleviate the suffering and death toll of Jewish refugees in Europe, either because he was viciously anti-Semitic or paranoid about fifth columnists or both.\textsuperscript{576} After Long’s rebuff, Hirschmann began contacting his “friends in the administration around Roosevelt” and “started pushing.”\textsuperscript{577} Not only did Hirschmann have the support of Frankfurter, many who had known and respected Kirstein (d. 1942), and his own personal contacts in the U.S. State Department, he had also garnered the support of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Assistant Solicitor General Oscar Cox, and Isador Lubin, U.S. Commissioner on Labor Statistics and trusted advisor to the President.\textsuperscript{578} Under pressure from Hirschmann’s “friends,” Long agreed to meet with the retailer a second time. Hirschmann persuaded Long to wire the U.S. Ambassador in Ankara to inquire as to whether such an envoy might be welcome. The Ambassador immediately agreed to host

\textsuperscript{575} M. J. Nurenberger Interview with Hillell Kook in Israel July 1, 1971 recorded in Medoff, Blowing the Whistle on Genocide, 83-84.
\textsuperscript{576} Breitman and Kraut, American Refugee Policy, 126-145.
\textsuperscript{577} Ira Hirschmann interview in Medoff, Blowing the Whistle, 85.
\textsuperscript{578} Henry Morgenthau to General Harold George, letter, January 28, 1944, “Administrative Matters,” War Refugee Board Records, 1944-45, FDRL; Hirschmann to Lubin, letter, March 22, 1944, “Hirschmann, Ira A.” Box 52, Isidor Lubin Papers, FDRL; Hirschmann to Cox, letter, August 22, 1944, “Hirschmann, Ira A.,” Box 15, Oscar Cox Papers FDRL; Also see Medoff (53-11) to get a sense of the critical role that both Morgenthau and Cox played in the formation of the WRB.
Hirschmann and provide basic support in his rescue efforts. In every published recollection of his second meeting with Long, Hirschmann described Long’s challenge: “What can you do there alone, as a private citizen?” Hirschmann calmly replied: “Sometimes a non-professional in a new situation may be able to pry open a window or a door which others have found hopelessly barred.”

Fortunately, Hirschmann did not travel to Ankara as a private citizen. Several weeks after Long reluctantly approved his trip Roosevelt signed an executive order to establish the WRB. The order granted Hirschmann the full protection of the U.S. State Department and almost unprecedented power to undertake negotiations with representatives from enemy countries for the purpose of saving refugees. When Long learned of the executive order, he wrote in his diary: “What they can do that I have not done I cannot imagine.” Hirschmann would soon prove that a lot could be done that Long had not imagined. When he arrived in Ankara in February 1944 Hirschmann was shocked by conditions refugees faced in the region. “What we try to comprehend in America as a deplorable outgrowth of war,” Hirschmann wrote to a friend, “is here seen in flesh and blood. That which was academic becomes real. A statistic becomes a human.”

Over the course of 1944 the executive board at Bloomingdale’s repeatedly

581 King, Midnight at the Pera Palace, 328-329; Erbelding, “About Time,” 164-167.
582 Hirschmann to Fiorello La Guardia, March 2, 1944, “Correspondence 1943-1955,” Box 2, IH FDRL.
approved Hirschmann’s requests for additional leave and continued to pay him his full salary while he was overseas.\textsuperscript{583}

Hirschmann’s work as the first special attaché to the War Refugee Board in 1944 would be impressive if he were a career diplomat; that he was not is one of reasons why at least one historian has labeled his efforts “superhuman.”\textsuperscript{584} During his two missions to Ankara, Hirschmann negotiated a series of agreements that brought nearly 7,000 Jews out of danger in the Balkans, through Turkey, and on to safety in Palestine. He also helped implement safeguards for Jews still living in Bulgaria and Romania after March 1944 and played a critical role in the infamous Joel Brand affair, one of the Nazis’ desperate attempts to trade the release of one million Jews for ten thousand Allied trucks.\textsuperscript{585} His most impressive achievement, though, came through his negotiations with a Romanian Minister, which ensured the release and protection of 48,000 Jews imprisoned in concentration camps in that country. The work took a physical toll on Hirschmann who endured many sleepless nights in Ankara and spent weeks recovering from his experiences, which he repeatedly described in letters to friends as heartbreaking.\textsuperscript{586} When his second mission concluded in October 1944 and Hirschmann returned to his post at

\textsuperscript{584} Diner, \textit{We Remember}, 297.
\textsuperscript{585} In April 1944, Adolf Eichmann, one of the principal architects of the Holocaust offered Brand, a young Hungarian Jewish activist, a grotesque deal. Eichmann would release one million Jews if Brand could convince Allied leaders to give Germany ten thousand trucks and other needed supplies. After the British Foreign Office and the Colonial Office in Cairo detained Brand, the WRB sent Hirschmann to conduct preliminary interviews as a test of Brand’s honesty. See Hirschmann, Report, Ankara, September 11, 1944, “Preliminary Reports Re: Activities in Turkey, June 18, 1944-September 11, 1944,” Box 2, IH FDRL. See Breitman and Kraut, \textit{American Refugee Policy}, 214-216.
\textsuperscript{586} See “Portions of Ira Hirschmann’s Diary, February to October, 1944” Box 1, IH FDRL.
Bloomingdale’s, he gave a nationally broadcast radio address to describe the work of the WRB to millions of Americans eager for news about the war. He opened his address by saying: “In light of the terrible need for destroying the enemy, which must take first place in the job of war, we seldom stop to think of the other essential job, and that is saving people.” Indeed, Hirschmann had managed to save more than fifty thousand people from certain death in the Balkans. Few Americans had done more to address the “other essential job” of war.

587 The emphasis was Hirschmann’s. I.A. Hirschmann, “Saving Refugees Through Turkey, Radio Address CBS, October 22, 1911, “Saving Refugees Through Turkey,” Box 3, IH FDRL.
588 Hirschmann’s work on behalf of refugees did not stop with the dissolution of the WRB at the end of the war. He returned to Europe as Special Inspector General to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) with a focus on Displaced Persons Camps. Hirschmann’s appointment to the UNRRA also came from an important political connection and friendship made through the retail industry. Former congressman and mayor of New York City, Fiorello La Guardia had noticed Hirschmann’s talents for publicity and recruited him as his campaign manager in 1932. The two became close friends and La Guardia even officiated Hirschmann’s wedding in 1937. When La Guardia accepted the Director Generalship of the UNRRA in 1946, Hirschmann was his first appointee. See Hirschmann, Caution to the Winds, 192-208; Hirschmann, The Embers Still Burn: An Eye-Witness View of the Postwar Ferment in Europe and the Middle East and our Disastrous Get-Soft-With-Germany Policy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1949).
Epilogue

Towards a New Narrative on the
Fall of American Department Stores

Between 1888, when John Wanamaker accepted an appointment to serve in President Benjamin Harrison’s cabinet, and 1945, when Ira Hirschmann returned home from his post on the War Refugee Board in Turkey, department stores enjoyed their heyday. Yet, over the next ten years eight major New York City department stores shut their doors, including McCreery’s, Hearn’s, and the sprawling Wanamaker complex on Broadway and Ninth Avenues. The same tragic case plagued cities across the Northeast from Washington and Baltimore to Cincinnati, Detroit, and Buffalo. By 1957 the New York Times columnist and future media mogul Carl Spielvogel lamented that the commercial capital of the country was suffering from “a case of disappearing department stores.” The irony, as Spielvogel pointed out, was that this “grave retailing phenomenon” erupted at a time when earnings and consumer spending had reached record high levels. He attributed the spate of closures to “numerous and complex factors,” beginning with executives who had failed to modernize aging infrastructures or adapt to new styles. He also argued that radical changes in the city’s population played a role. “Many of the middle-class homemakers who spend heavily in department stores,” Spielvogel noted, “have moved to the suburbs.” Moreover, lower and middle income families that remained in the city increasingly shopped at low-cost houses that easily undersold venerable old firms like Wanamaker’s. Despite the grim tone of the column (it was titled “Old Stores
Die if they Stay Old"), Spielvogel concluded that there was hope for any firm associated with a chain operation. For example, he argued that Abraham & Straus, which operated under the Federated Department Stores chain, provided “graphic testimony that there still is a profit to be made from New York City.” In other words, Spielvogel speculated that the old downtown stores could survive as long as a growing number of more profitable suburban stores subsidized their traditionally high overhead costs.589

For decades, historians, journalists, and retailers themselves have tended to agree with how Spielvogel explained the demise of urban department stores. Much like the mid-century decline of America’s downtowns, the disappearance of these once foundational commercial institutions has long been viewed as inevitable—the result of seemingly inexorable economic forces. Scholars have pointed to three key factors in particular: the proliferation of the automobile, the expansion of suburbs, and the rise of low-cost retailers, or what one historian has labeled the “discount revolution.” Today’s thriving suburban commercial centers, anchored by big-box stores like Wal-Mart and Target, are evidence enough that these explanations are important. Yet, as recent studies have revealed, cars, suburbs, and big-box stores are not the whole story. For example, Alison Isenberg’s work on cities illuminates a “changing constellation of national actors” who influenced the decline of commercial centers, from real estate developers and urban planners to academic retail experts and consumer activists. Vicki Howard’s analysis of the national department store industry expands on Isenberg’s work to reveal how federal,

state, and local policy makers, regulators, jurists, legislators, and lobbyists facilitated the rise and fall of these pioneering commercial institutions. In particular, Howard argues that neoliberal political and economic practices, such as deregulation and privatization, drove department stores from large metropolises like New York City, as well as smaller mom-and-pop stores from main streets across the country. Both studies make clear that the forces that have shaped both our cities and the marketplace more generally were neither objective nor inevitable, but rather the result of deliberate and informed actions taken by an array of powerful actors. However, for the major urban department stores that have anchored this dissertation, there is still more to the story.  

The unique position that large urban department stores occupied in early twentieth-century American life stemmed, in no small part, from retailers’ deep connections in Washington and their entanglements in vast trade networks abroad. Moreover, by approaching transatlantic trade in a more cooperative and less destructive manner than many other American magnates, retailers reinforced their influence among elected officials and were widely regarded as highly knowledgeable about business and political conditions in Europe. To a greater extent than scholars have yet to appreciate, retailers shaped the marketplace according to their own worldviews, as informed by their business acumen, expertise in trade, and personal views on politics, race, and religion. With this knowledge, it is impossible to view department stores as bound by the

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limits of the city, state, or nation. If John Wanamaker thrust the retail industry into a
modern era largely through his success on Capitol Hill and in the Paris trade, and if other
retailers followed similar paths to industry leadership prior to the Second World War,
then national politics and international trade must have a place in explaining the decline
of department stores, too. Both Isenberg and Howard have made clear how national
policies and political movements, from urban renewal campaigns to civil rights activists,
contributed to the downfall of cities and department stores alike. But what of the deep
connections that retailers themselves had once fostered in the White House? Or the
relationships they cultivated with consular officials and ambassadors in key trade
centers? Did any retailer have the ear of President Eisenhower or his closest advisors
when department stores began to disappear from New York City? Which trade
agreements and economic or social policies might they have discussed? There is little
doubt that the Second World War significantly altered retailers’ political alliances and
trade priorities, but as yet no study has accounted for the role these shifts might have
played in the downfall of major urban department stores.

In their heyday, department stores served not only as anchors of downtown
commercial districts and harbingers of a new kind of consumer culture, but also as
institutions that connected ordinary Americans to extraordinary global events and vital
national conversations. Executives, buyers, and stores that operated before and after this
period did not achieve the same levels of influence—a fact that automobiles, suburbs, and
discount stores do not fully explain. After all, many of the failed department stores ran
suburban outlets, at least for a time, and none of those stores held Americans’
imaginations in the same way their old urban predecessors had. What’s more, the shopping plazas, malls, and big-box stores that came to dominate new commercial landscapes largely avoided drawing consumers into national political or globally conscious conversations in quite the same way—with one notable exception. Wal-Mart, now the country’s largest retailer (by far), has engaged Americans in a very different kind of political consciousness, one centered on the firm’s unique brand of evangelical Christian free-enterprise, an ethos that very rarely looks abroad for any reason outside of missionary work. At the same time, Wal-Mart’s sales and trade networks are far more “global” than any pre-war retailer could have imagined, and much, much larger than any of its competitors. How did an industry led by northeasterners, liberals, Democrats, and Jews in the 1940s come to be so dominated by Sam Walton, a southerner, conservative, Republican, and Christian by 1970? Such a paradigm shift warrants a broader explanation, one that looks beyond cities and suburbs, discounts and automobiles.591

New narratives tracing the downfall of American department stores like Wanamaker’s, Filene’s, and even Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s, must also address what happened to retailers’ connections in Washington and the impact of profound shifts in the retail trade during the postwar period. Suburbanization is a major factor, but not only because it pushed middle-class consumers beyond the city. As Spielvogel pointed out, suburban branches or chains had the potential to subsidize older and grander city-center stores, but they also decentralized and bureaucratized management and merchandising.

Highly profitable branch stores did not reflect the worldviews of their civic-minded and politically-savvy founders, but rather the persuasions of forgettable mid-level managers operating independently from the downtown stores. As decentralization undermined the status and visibility of leading executives, so too it must have undermined their pull in Washington. Suburban branch department stores did not, for example, throw their weight behind national service programs, foster patriotism, or support wartime mobilization during the second half of the twentieth century, nor did they boast managers with connections to national political parties or to elected officials in Washington. Lacking the foresight of their founders, branch stores adopted the zeitgeist of their time: the notion that simply selling goods—any kind of goods and lots of them—served the nation. While sales at suburban branch stores skyrocketed at mid-century (they accounted for more than half of total department store sales by 1966), the downtown stores began to disappear. In many ways, the decentralization of department stores and the declining influence of once-visionary retail executives shaped, in part, the rise of what Lizabeth Cohen has labeled the “purchaser as citizen,” by divorcing retail from politics at all levels: local, national, and global. Ironically, as the image of the American consumer gained more political importance in the context of the Cold War, retail executives linked to pre-war department stores, the successors to Wanamaker and Kirstein, seem to have lost interest in their own political import.592

The slow drain of high-level politics from the circles of department store executives came at a time when they could least afford it—amid seismic shifts in global trade. Scholars have often pointed to the late 1960s and 70s as a crucial turning point for the United States, away from a national economy fueled by its productive capacities and trade surpluses and towards one dependent on consumer power and trade deficits. In search of producing cheaper consumer goods, many large American corporations expanded their production methods by sending manufacturing and even management operations overseas (though mostly not to Europe). By the 1970s this globalization trend had begun to cause economic stagnation and deindustrialization, spawning a middle class awash in cheap goods, but suffering from low wages and declining job opportunities. Large manufacturers and consumers have tended to anchor studies focused on the “global shock” to the national economy during the second half of the twentieth century, while retailers have remained largely on the sidelines. Without a doubt, retailers that embraced global free trade, such as Wal-Mart and other big-box discounters, succeeded beyond measure. But these firms did not advertise their trade in any particular national context, at least not in the same way that department stores had once promoted Austrian imports as Alpine fashions. Instead, firms like Wal-Mart repackaged cheap goods manufactured overseas as part and parcel of an American way of life. In a society that prized “abundance” above other conceptions of prosperity, retailers committed to a bygone vision of commerce as something connected to a national vision or world events, likely suffered from a vast cultural disconnect. At the very moment that Henry Luce deemed the twentieth century “the American century,” downtown department stores, with their
decades-old trade networks entrenched in war-torn Europe, likely found themselves outmoded by a trade environment that was at once more global and far less meaningful to the average American. In short, as demand for a commercial institution that put Americans in touch with the nation and world around them disappeared, so too, did the department stores. Branches and big-boxes better suited to the new imperatives of trade and prosperity rose comfortably to take their place.593

AMC executives severed their connections with Hanns Streicher when Germany declared war on the United States in 1941, but they tracked him down again in Austria in 1946. Streicher had survived six bombings during the war, and by 1947 he and Kirstein’s successor at the AMC hatched a plan to reopen a trade office in Vienna. Streicher managed that office until 1964, at which time the AMC looked very little like the innovative cooperative buying organization that he joined thirty years earlier. By the mid-1960s the AMC’s largest client was still, at least in name, a founding member of the organization, the Dayton Co. of Minneapolis. However, in 1962 the Dayton Co. unrolled a new discount chain to better compete in the burgeoning global trade and amid the culture of abundance. They called it Target, and designed the now-iconic red “bulls-eye” to represent the new firm’s “marksmanship” in the competition over low prices. Target quickly became the AMC’s most important client, and in 1998 the big-box retail giant purchased the AMC outright and later renamed it Target Sourcing Services. Thus, by the

dawn of the twenty-first century, a large discount chain had swallowed up the most powerful retail buying organization of the early twentieth century—the lifeblood of some of the country’s most innovative department stores. This postwar history promises to add a new and important dimension to our understanding of the relationship between the global economic turn and the rise of mass consumption. After all, if modern urban department stores were never as provincial as they have so often been characterized, then perhaps their demise suggests another paradigm shift. As the retail trade became more global in scope, American consumers became only more insular, and less directly interested in and connected to the world around them. And that, is a “grave retailing phenomenon” indeed.594

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Niki C. Lefebvre
American & New England Studies, Boston University
226 Bay State Road, Boston, Massachusetts 02215
nlefebvr@bu.edu

Education
PhD Candidate, American and New England Studies, Boston University 2012 - present
MA, American & New England Studies, Boston University 2011
MA, Public History, University of Massachusetts Amherst 2009
BA, History and Philosophy, Mary Lyon Scholar, Mount Holyoke College 2005

Publications


Fellowships & Awards
Society for the History of American Foreign Relations Diversity Grant 2016
American Jewish Historical Society Travel Grant 2016
Boston University Center for the Humanities Dissertation Fellowship 2015 -16
Boston University Graduate Summer Research Fellowship 2015
Mellon Foundation John E. Sawyer Seminar Pre-doctoral Fellowship 2014 - 15
The Angela J. and James J. Rallis Memorial Award at Boston University 2013
The Clarimond Mansfield Award at Boston University 2013
American & New England Studies Johnson Fund Travel Grant 2013
Graduate Assistantship, “Contact Zones” Lecture Series    2011 - 12
Boston University Outstanding Teaching Fellow Award    2009 - 10
University of Massachusetts Caldwell Prize for Best History Paper 2009
Research Scholar, Mass. Humanities Council Scholar in Residence Grant 2009
University of Mass. Distinguished Teaching Award Nomination 2009
Mary Lyon Scholar (highest honors), Mount Holyoke College 2005
Academic All-New England C.C./Track, Mount Holyoke College 2004

**Teaching Experience**

Graduate Writing Fellowship, Boston University 2012 - 14
Course: *Modern American Consumer Culture*

Teaching Fellowships, Boston University 2009 - 12
Courses: Postwar America, 1945-1968; United States since 1968; Modern American Cultural History; Art and Politics

Instructor, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences 2011
Course: *American Culture, Identity, and Public Life*

Teaching Fellowships, University of Massachusetts Amherst 2007 - 09
Courses: Western Thought: 1600-present; Colonial Latin America; Indigenous Peoples of North America; Development of American Civilization to 1876

Assistant Tutor, Summer Fellowship Program, Historic Deerfield, Inc. 2008 - 09
Course: Seminars in Research Skills, Public History, American Decorative Arts

**Conference Presentations**


“’The Other Essential Job of War’: Jewish American Merchants and the European Refugee Crisis, 1933-1945.” Immigration & Urban History Seminar, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts, February 2016.
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**University Service**

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<td>Planning Committee, American Political History Institute Annual Conference, Boston University</td>
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History Department Representative, Graduate Student Senate,
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<td>Assistant to co-chairs for the 2015 conference of the Society for the History of American Foreign Relations</td>
<td>2014-15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Scholar, Massachusetts Humanities Council</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curatorial Internship, <em>Into the Woods</em>, Historic Deerfield, Inc.</td>
<td>2008 - 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreter, The Old Manse, The Trustees of Reservations</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive Ranger, Boston National Historical Park, N.P.S.</td>
<td>2003 - 04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director, National History Club, The Concord Review, Inc.</td>
<td>2006 - 07</td>
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