Antisemitism in practice

The destruction of two "Jewish" stores in 1930s France

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Translator: Adam Lozier, Editor: Sophie Borresen, Senior editor: Mark Mellor

In 20 & 21. Revue d'histoire 2024/3 No 163 , pages 19 to 35
Publisher Presses de Sciences Po

ISSN 0294-1759
ISBN 9782724642537
DOI 10.3917/vin.163.0019
Uploaded: 12/30/2024

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Yacine Chitour et Pauline Funk

This article takes a micro-historical approach to the ransacking of Jewish and Polish shopkeeper Mathis Lerner's stores in Dijon in 1938. We analyze the event through the lens of the rumors circulating about Lerner amid the context of partial mobilization and the Munich Agreement, such as the claim that Lerner brazenly shouted "Heil Hitler!" in full view of mobilized Frenchmen in September 1938. We also explore the police investigation's sources, such as the depositions of the accused, as well as the aftermath of the case, including the shocking expulsion of Lerner from France despite his status as a victim. We also examine the circulation of the incident abroad, particularly across the Rhine, where it was portrayed as an example of French shopkeepers' resistance to the establishment of Jews in this economic sector. Was this incident an anti-Jewish pogrom or a precursor to the antisemitism of the 1940s? This article reasserts all the significance of the affair by situating it in the broader context of 1938.

On the evening of October 1, 1938, an altercation broke out between two shopkeepers on what was known as Dijon's "oldest commercial street."[1] The conflict between Mathis Lerner, a Polish shopkeeper based at 29–31 Rue du Bourg, and Gabriel Lhuillier, who owned the store across the street, culminated in the looting of Le Petit Soldeur ("The Little Discount Trader") and À la Parisienne ("Paris Style"), the two shops owned by Mathis Lerner and his wife, Jenta Obarzanek. After midnight, the gendarmerie, and later the army, intervened, and the Lerners were evacuated, their shops having been completely destroyed.[2]

The events on Rue du Bourg are cited in historiography as foreshadowing the antisemitism of the Second World War,[3] as an expression of discontent tied to accusations of Jewish warmongering during the 1938 "refugee crisis,"[4] and as illustrations of the antisemitic climate in France during and after the Munich

(1) Le Progrès de la Côte-d'Or, April 8, 1938, 6, accessed June 06, 2025, https://www.retronews.fr/journal/le-progres-de-la-cote-d-or/08-avril-1938/6/3f1fd022-53b4-4cea-b4f5-ed4af40ae91f. **Translator's note:** Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

(2) This article is part of the Lubartworld project (European Research Council project no. 818843, directed by Claire Zalc). We would like to thank Thomas Chopard, Claire Lemercier, Nicolas Mariot, Anton Perdoncin, Tymoteusz Skowroński, Franciszek Zakrzewski, and Claire Zalc for their insightful and detailed comments on earlier drafts of this text. The authors alone are responsible for the content of these pages.

(3) Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, Vichy France and the Jews, 2nd ed. (Stanford University Press, 2019), 27; William I. Brustein, Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3; Ralph Schor, L'Antisémitisme en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres: Prélude à Vichy (Complexe, 2005), 167.

(4) Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942* (Stanford University Press , 1999), 189.

Agreement.[1] While these approaches treat the case as representative, this article reflects instead on the ways in which it is exceptional.[2]

The ransacking of Lerner's shops was unique in three respects. First, it took the form of a demonstration of collective violence, and some of the participants involved were still serving in the army as part of the partial mobilization of September 1938. Second, it sparked controversy over the antisemitic nature of the incident: While Lerner, a Polish Jewish shopkeeper, claimed he had been targeted because of antisemitism, the authorities officially denied this characterization. Finally, the event quickly became a public "affair," circulating in both the French and Nazi press and providing fodder for the antisemitic propaganda of Joseph Goebbels' ministry.

This article traces the chronology of the episode, identifies its key actors, and reconstructs the dynamics at play and the ways the event was politicized. We use the incident as a case study for analyzing antisemitism in France in the late 1930s: the driving forces behind it, how it manifested itself, and how it was responded to. In taking a case-study approach, we draw on the methods and insights of micro-history: We analyze the emergence and development of the event through the lens of contexts, social environments, and interactions that can be grasped only at the local level.[3]

To provide multiple perspectives on the case, we consulted sources from the French authorities at the municipal, prefectural, and ministerial levels, as well as from civic associations. The case file includes reports produced by the Dijon police, along with transcripts of hearings with suspects and witnesses. A prefectural file was also opened on the Lerner affair, as were three Sûreté nationale[4] files, now part of the so-called Moscow collection.[5] While the judicial handling of the events is documented in the rulings from both the first-instance and appellate courts, our examination of local, national, and international press sheds light on how the events were covered in the media. Finally, we consider the actors responsible for politicizing the affair—first and foremost the Ligue internationale contre l'antisémitisme (LICA) (International League Against Antisemitism), founded in 1928 by Bernard Lecache.

This article contributes to several bodies of scholarship, particularly that concerning antisemitic violence in France among shopkeepers, a social group in which anti-Jewish discourse has historically found especially fertile ground.[6] The judicial investigation offers invaluable sources for analyzing the language used and

(1) Emmanuel Debono, "Radiographie d'un pic d'antisémitisme: La crise de Munich (automne 1938)," Archives juives 43 (2010): 77–95, 84, doi:10.3917/aj.431.0077; see also Dimitri Vouzelle, Être juif en Côte-d'Or (1933–1952): Espoirs et désastre (Éditions universitaires de Dijon, 2024), 53–68.

(2) See Ivan Ermakoff, "La microhistoire au prisme de l'exception," Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire 139, no. 3 (2018): 193–211, doi:10.3917/ving.139.0193; see also Ivan Ermakoff, "Exceptional Cases: Epistemic Contributions and Normative Expectations," *European Journal of Sociology* 55, no. 2 (2014): 223–243, doi:10.1017/S0003975614000101.

(3) Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel, eds., Penser par cas (Éditions de l'EHESS, 2005); and, in particular for the case of the Holocaust, Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttmann, eds., *Microhistories of the Holocaust* (Berghahn Books, 2019).

(4) "National Security," the former name of the French national police force, primarily responsible for domestic intelligence and surveillance.

(5) Sophie Cœuré, Frédéric Monier, and Gérard Naud, "Le retour de Russie des archives françaises: Le cas du fonds de la Sûreté," Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire 45 (1995): 133–139, doi: 10.3406/xxs.1995.3390.

(6) See Vicki Caron's discussion of Philip Nord and Steven Zdatny's theses in "The Antisemitic Revival in France in the 1930s: The Socioeconomic Dimension Reconsidered," The Journal of Modern History 70, no. 1 (1998): 24–73, 68, doi: 10.1086/235002. See also Florent Le Bot, "La 'famille' du cuir contre Bata: Malthusianisme, corporatisme, xénophobie et antisémitisme dans le monde de la chaussure en France, 1930–1950," Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine 52–4, no. 4 (2005): 131–151, doi:10.3917/rhmc.524.0131.

justifications offered by witnesses and participants in the rampage, some of whom were shopkeepers from Dijon, a bourgeois city that had been increasingly dominated by the commercial elite for several decades.[7] While the rise of antisemitism in 1930s France is often examined through its expressions in public rhetoric, the Lerner case allows us to examine the collective turn to violence in the small-business world.[8] It also offers an opportunity to reconsider the historiography of anti-Jewish modes of action. Looting and even pogroms have been identified as part of a repertoire of violent tactics contemplated and deployed in certain urban areas.[9] The way the Lerner affair was responded to and the success with which it was appropriated by Nazi propaganda also raise the question of how the affair should be contextualized relative to the broader wave of antisemitic violence that swept across Europe from the 1930s through the late 1940s. How was the violence of the Lerner affair responded to by contemporaries? How should we interpret it in relation to comparable, though larger-scale, events in Germany and Poland in 1938?

The destruction of a "Jewish" business: Dijon, October 1938

At 7 p.m. on October 1, 1938, Lhuillier and a companion in officer's uniform forcefully confronted the Lerner couple at the entrance to their store. Rumors quickly circulated that Lerner had shouted "Heil Hitler!," "Down with France!," or "Long live war!" at Lhuillier and his companion, a horticulturist. As night fell, a crowd of between 300 and 500 people ransacked the two shops. Despite the presence of municipal police, the crowd shattered windows, looted merchandise, and destroyed all of the couple's equipment. Some even attempted to attack the Lerners, who were hiding upstairs. Police reports compiled after the incident noted the heterogeneous makeup of the crowd, which included onlookers, local shopkeepers, communists, and far-right activists.

An exceptional event in 1938

The violent destruction of the two shops in Dijon, an affluent city[10] of moderate urban and economic importance,[11] may strike modern historians as surprising. Although the ransacking of the shops and the violence against the Lerner family were treated as routine news items in the French press, the scale of the riot and the extent of the destruction make the Lerner affair "an exceptional case."[12] In the late 1930s, antisemitic flyers were plastered throughout French cities,[13] and physical violence against Jews was on the rise—and Dijon

(7) Gilles Laferté, "L'homme politique, l'industriel et les universitaires: Alliance à la croisée du régionalisme dans l'entre-deux-guerres," Politix 67 (2004): 45–69, 64, doi: 10.3406/polix.2004.1624.

(8) In this regard, we follow Christian Gerlach's proposal to analyze anti-Jewish persecution in terms of practices rather than mental representations or motivations: Christian Gerlach, The Extermination of the European Jews (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 337. In doing so, we build on Tal Bruttmann and Laurent Joly's research efforts in La France antijuive de 1936: L'agression de Léon Blum à la Chambre des députés (CNRS Éditions, 2016). See also works highlighting the decisive role played by antisemitic and xenophobic ideas in the violent acts of the Kristallnacht pogroms—for example: Robert Braun and Daniel Solomon, "Popular Hatreds and the Spread of Kristallnacht Violence: Evidence from Children's Stories," Annales de démographie historique 145, no. 1 (2023): 49–72, doi:10.3917/adh.145.0049.

(9) Charles Tilly, The Politics of Collective Violence (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 131–150; Javier Auyero, "The Political Makings of the 2001 Lootings in Argentina," Journal of Latin American Studies 38, no. 2 (2006): 241–265, doi:10.1017/S0022216X06000708.

(10) Pierre Gras, ed., Histoire de Dijon (Privat, 1987), 338 and 362.

(11) Laferté, "L'homme politique, l'industriel et les universitaires," 57.

(12) Ermakoff, "Exceptional Cases."

(13) Schor, L'Antisémitisme en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres, 35.

was no exception. In 1932, 1935, and 1937, buildings and businesses owned by Jews in the city were targeted with antisemitic leaflets.[1] The shift to mob violence, however, along with the attempts to harm the Lerners physically—and despite the presence of police from the outset[2]—was unique to the events of October 1938. Elsewhere in mainland France, only the looting of shops in Nancy and Strasbourg at the end of September came close in scale.[3] In those cases, the proximity of the cities to the German border, along with the heightened tensions linked to the recent influx of Jewish émigrés,[4] partly explain the violence. Likewise, the deadly anti-Jewish riots in Constantine four years earlier can be partly attributed to the involvement of a far-right activist and, more broadly, to tensions generated by the colonial context.[5] The Dijon case is different. What can explain the outburst of violence against the Lerner family?

Lerner's isolation

According to his friends, Lerner "was very good to his own people, to his fellow Jews in need, and even to others."[6] Nonetheless, the available evidence regarding the composition of Dijon's Jewish population suggests that Lerner—who was born in 1904, in Lubartów, Poland, arrived in France in 1925, and settled in Dijon in 1928—was relatively isolated there. In 1938, Dijon's Jewish population was small, and indeed had never been significant.[7] The racial census of July 31, 1942 recorded 376 Jews living in Dijon,[8] out of a total population of over 96,000 in 1939.[9] Robert Weiner and Richard Sharpless estimated the Jewish population at around 500, primarily of Alsatian origin,[10] indicating a modest community made up mainly of "French Israelites"[11]—unlike the Lerner family—who were joined, beginning in 1933, by families of German-speaking Jewish refugees.[12]

Between 1906 and 1936, the number of shopkeepers with employees in Dijon grew by 12 percent,[13] and although the municipality came under the control of Socialist Robert Jardillier in 1935, Dijon's shopkeepers remained an influential professional group. They had held a central place in Gaston Gérard's right-wing municipal government since 1908[14] and were also a key constituency for the far-right

(1) Archives départementales de la Côte-d'Or (ADCO) (Departmental archives of Côte-d'Or), SM 7504; and Archives municipales de Dijon (AMD) (Municipal archives of Dijon), SG 118/D.

(2) ADCO, SM 20937/12.859, Mathis Lerner, deposition.

(3) Debono, "Radiographie d'un pic d'antisémitisme," 79.

(4) Françoise Job, "Un titre israélite de province: La Revue juive de Lorraine (1925–1940)," Archives juives 36, no. 1 (2003): 40–51, 41, doi:10.3917/aj.361.0040.

(5) Joshua Cole, *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria* (2019, Cornell University Press).

(6) ADCO, SM 20937/12.859, Auguste Beaudoin, deposition.

(7) Robert I. Weiner and Richard E. Sharpless, An Uncertain Future: Voices of a French Jewish Community, 1940–2012 (University of Toronto Press, 2012).

(8) ADCO, 1090 W 36, "Le recensement du 20 octobre 1940 compte 48 Polonais parmi les 666 Juifs recensés en Côte-d'Or"; see also Audrey Casado, "Être juif à Dijon, fin des années trente, fin des années quarante" (master's thesis, Université de Bourgogne, 2003).

(9) ADCO, 41 M 21.

(10) Weiner and Sharpless, An Uncertain Future, 21.

(11) Diane Afoumado, "Les relations entre 'Israélites français' et Juifs immigrés durant les années trente," Revue d'histoire de la Shoah 166, no. 2 (1999): 121–143, doi:10.3917/rhsho1.166.0122.

(12) Vouzelle, Être juif en Côte-d'Or (1933–1952), 25–52.

(13) Pierre Levêque, ed., La Côte-d'Or de la préhistoire à nos jours (Éditions Bordessoules, 1996), 387.

(14) Gras, Histoire de Dijon, 364.

movement Croix-de-Feu ("Cross of Fire").[15] Lerner's isolation was also reinforced by his exclusion from Rue du Bourg's business coalitions. In 1933, thirteen of the street's shops were members of the Union économique de Dijon,[16] a credit union founded in 1906 to allow working-class consumers to purchase goods on credit. Aux Travailleurs réunis ("The United Workers' Store"), Lhuillier's shop, was among its members, whereas Lerner's two shops were not.

The Lerner family's dual social and professional isolation therefore stands in contrast to the pattern identified by Christoph Kreutzmüller in explaining the relative resilience of Jewish businesses in Berlin until 1941. While the dynamics of solidarity and "opportunities for self-assertion"[17] were significant in this regard in large cities, they were far more limited for a Polish immigrant in Dijon, whose city center was dominated by shops selling traditional Burgundian products.[18] The October 1, 1938 attack specifically targeted Lerner and his family: The altercation began when Lhuillier slapped Jenta. The violence was not directed at Jews as a group as much as at Lerner as an individual and as a Jewish shopkeeper. This personal, confrontational dimension of the ransacking[19] demonstrates the entanglement of antisemitic motives with the private economic relationships and rivalries of those involved in the event.

A rumor in the midst of the Munich crisis

Vicki Caron points to a more immediate cause of the aggression against the Lerners: the Munich crisis, which triggered outbreaks of violence across France against Jews accused of pushing for war. In addition to the impact of the militarization of French society following the partial mobilization of 1938, we emphasize the role of rumors in these episodes of collective violence. Remarkably, a rumor that circulated about a shopkeeper in Nancy on September 26, 1938 portrayed him as a Jewish spy who, it was claimed, had a direct telephone line to the Führer in his basement.[20] There is a striking thematic similarity between that rumor and the one targeting Lerner, which also played on anti-German sentiment and accusations of Jewish warmongering.

As in the case of the ready-to-wear shops run by Jewish shopkeepers in Orléans three decades later,[21] the rumor targeted a Jewish shopkeeper with a thriving business. Lerner had attracted "the jealousy of almost all the shopkeepers in the district."[22] The police investigation also found that "since 1925, he has acquired quite a large fortune. He owns the building where his store is located, valued

(15) Police sources estimate that the Dijon branch of the Croix-de-Feux had around 3,000 members in 1936 (ADCO, SM 9730).

(16) Advertisement for the Union économique de Dijon, Le Progrès de la Côte-d'Or, October 12, 1933, 7, accessed June 06, 2025, https://www.retronews.fr/journal/le-progres-de-la-cote-d-or/12-octobre-1933/7/49d61e0d-8771-4af2-b04e-3eec673a5b1d.

(17) Christoph Kreutzmüller, Ingo Loose, and Benno Nietzel, "La destruction de l'activité économique juive Les cas de Berlin, Francfort-sur-le-Main et Breslau entre 1933 et 1942," Revue d'histoire de la Shoah 209, no. 2 (2018): 81–96, 82, doi:10.3917/rhsho.209.0081.

(18) Gilles Laferté, La Bourgogne et ses vins: Image d'origine contrôlée (Belin, 2006); Robert Aldrich, Economy and Society in Burgundy since 1850 (Croom Helm, 1984), 101 and 193.

(19) Randall Collins, Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory (Princeton University Press, 2008), 71.

(20) Le Droit de vivre, October 8, 1938, 2, accessed June 06, 2025, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1820887b/f2.item.

(21) Edgar Morin, *Rumour in Orléans*, trans. Peter Green (Pantheon Books, 1971), 40–41 and 59 sq.

(22) ADCO, SM 20937/12.859, Auguste Beaudoin, deposition.

at 150,000 francs,"[1] along with an additional investment property.[2]

While the investigation into the attack did not rule out the possibility of a plot orchestrated by shopkeepers in Lerner's neighborhood, the eight individuals ultimately convicted were bystanders who admitted to participating in the ransacking out of indignation: two prostitutes, four laborers, a waiter, and a waitress. They were described by the authorities as "individuals of low moral character" and "sources of public disorder."[3] Some depositions also mentioned the presence of two or three "Algerians"[4] who had allegedly stolen merchandise—thereby reactivating racist tropes about theft. The rumors circulating from Nancy to Dijon thus united shopkeepers and local bystanders in opposition to a single individual who became the focal point of condemnation.[5] The words attributed to Lerner reveal the syncretic and conflated nature of the rumor, which fused the figures of the Jew, the foreigner, and the commercial rival.

Discrediting Lerner, defining the affair: The words used to describe the attack

The way the attack was characterized was a decisive issue. Witness testimonies, reports from the police commissioner to the prefect, telegrams from the prefect to the minister, and courtroom hearings all contributed to a range of narratives about the night of October 1, 1938. In describing the ransacking, individuals at times emphasized Lerner's status as a shopkeeper, and at other times, his status as a foreigner. These varying framings help explain the reprobation directed at Lerner. How the event was described also shaped how it was managed by the local authorities: The characterization of the aggression and the official response to it went hand in hand.

Polish, Jewish, German: "The words of the street" and the many faces of rumor

"Hostile chants were directed at 'Boches,'[6] Jews, and foreigners," reported the central commissioner (*commissaire centrale*) of the Dijon police the day after the attack.[7] For anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, chants and slogans in pogrom contexts play a cohesive role, forging a collective identity in opposition to a foreign "them."[8] The thirty-six witnesses interviewed during the judicial investigation did not always know Lerner by name.[9] To refer to him, they used periphrastic expressions that, when taken together, reveal the layers of otherness ascribed to him. Seven witnesses referred to him by profession, calling him "a shopkeeper." One of the three who claimed to have heard him shout "Long live Hitler" described him as a "foreign shopkeeper." Other testimonies highlighted his Jewishness: Alphonse Quirin, a laborer who had been drawn into the action as he left a bar, and who was later charged with smashing the shop window, referred to Lerner as "the Jewish

(1) ADCO, 1090 W 42, report no. 12865.
(2) ADCO, 1090 W 42, letter from Lerner to the prefect, November 15.
(3) ADCO, 1090 W 42, reports no. 12864 and no. 12865, October 2, 1938.
(4) In the Côte-d'Or department, small numbers of Algerian workers began arriving in Montbard in the 1920s. Pierre-Jacques Derainne, "Histoire et mémoire des étrangers en Bourgogne aux XIXe et XXe siècles," Hommes & migrations, no. 1278 (2009): 114–126, doi:10.4000/hommesmigrations.236.
(5) Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (1965, repr. Sage, 1994), 101–105.
(6) Equivalent of "Kraut," "Fritz," "Hun," and so on.
(7) ADCO, 1090 W 42, report no. 12864, October 2, 1938.
(8) Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Pogrom Cries: Essays on Polish-Jewish History, 1939–1946 (2017, repr. Peter Lang, 2019), 245.
(9) All verbatim quotations cited in the following paragraphs are drawn from the case file (ADCO, SM 2093/12.859).

shopkeeper," while two others described him as a "German Jew."

The label of foreigner was central to the accusations Lhuillier leveled against the Lerner family. One witness reported hearing Lhuillier shout, as he left the store, "Hang the Jews . . . kick the foreigners out!" ("*Les Juifs en l'air . . . les étrangers à la porte !*") before pointing out "Polish Jewish stores" to the crowd. This exhortation, marked by belligerent nationalism, lumps Jews and foreigners together, excluding both from the boundaries of the nation. Lhuillier continued his tirade as he entered the store: "Porker . . . pig . . . you were going to fatten yourself up while we were out there getting blown to shreds" ("*Gros porc . . . cochon . . . tu allais t'engrosser pendant qu'on allait se faire 'crever' la peau*").

The mobilization of reservists in September 1938 revived the distinction between mobilizable Frenchmen and foreigners that had been established in 1889,[10] and it sparked an atmosphere of "extraordinary animation" in Dijon.[11] In this remilitarized context, Lhuillier's threats evoked a classic figure from the imaginary of wartime masculinity: the shirker who avoids the dangers of the front. Conversely, "*se faire trouer la peau*" ("to get blown to bits" or "pumped full of lead") was a common expression during the First World War, in reference to the bullet-ridden bodies of the poilus. It recalls the embuscomania (shirker-mania) of 1914–1918,[12] which, as late as the summer of 1936, had been directed at Roger Salengro, one of Léon Blum's ministers.

Here, the shopkeeper conjures an imaginary world shaped by his wartime socialization. Lhuillier, a veteran, had distinguished himself as much by his failings—he was stripped of his rank in 1916 for a serious breach of discipline—as by his accomplishments: He had received a regimental citation and been awarded a bronze star. He was an advocate of mutual aid among veterans during the interwar period,[13] and he received a medal in July 1938.[14] When Lhuillier justified his actions in his deposition and criticized Lerner for his "mocking smiles at [him] and other mobilized soldiers in the neighborhood," he was drawing on two familiar figures: the jeering shirker[15] who stays safely back from the front lines and the antisemitic stereotype of the arrogant Jew. This figure was reactivated in the context of the Munich Agreement, after which Jews—particularly German Jews,[16] who had been exiled since Hitler's rise to power in 1933—were accused of being warmongers.[17] At a moment when partial mobilization was blurring the boundaries between peace and war and between the military and civilian realms,

(10) Gérard Noiriel, Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France (XIXe–XXe siècle): Discours publics, humiliations privées (Fayard, 2007).

(11) Le Progrès de la Côte-d'Or, September 25, 1938, 1, accessed June 06, 2025, https://www.retronews.fr/journal/le-progres-de-la-cote-d-or/25-septembre-1938/1/72767bb8-d446-485d-8bb0-d477d294af52.

(12) Charles Ridel, Les Embusqués (Armand Colin, 2007). The obsession with shirkers was particularly widespread among shopkeepers. See Claire Zalc, Melting Shops: Une histoire des commerçants étrangers en France (Perrin, 2010), 219.

(13) Lhuillier was responsible for collecting contributions for the Amicale mutual aid societies of the 27th and 227th Infantry Regiments. See *Le Progrès de la Côte-d'Or*, September 23, 1925, 2, accessed June 06, 2025, https://www.retronews.fr/journal/le-progres-de-la-cote-d-or/23-septembre-1925/2/2b1edac6-0f7a-4449-b386-0c45b13078f2; *Le Progrès de la Côte-d'Or*, July 25, 1928, 2, accessed June 06, 2025, https://www.retronews.fr/journal/le-progres-de-la-cote-d-or/25-juillet-1928/2/f0d82077-64f4-4c35-9a7d-2dba602c8816.

(14) ADCO, R25000, registration card ("fiche matricule") for Gabriel Paul Lhuilier.

(15) Ridel, Les Embusqués, 19.

(16) Claire Zalc, "Des réfugiés aux indésirables: Les pouvoirs publics français face aux émigrés du IIIe Reich entre 1933 et 1939," in Construction des nationalités et immigration dans la France contemporaine, ed. Éric Guichard and Gérard Noiriel (Presses de l'ENS, 1997), 259–275, 266.

(17) Schor, L'Antisémitisme en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres,145–168.

Lhuillier and his friend revived images of the enemy before attacking the shops: It was not for nothing that they called Lerner a "dirty Boche." To this symbolic arsenal is added what Pierre Birnbaum identifies as the denunciation of the "fat cat,"[1] in opposition to the honest French shopkeeper—a theme characteristic of the populist rhetoric that was increasingly common among small independent shopkeepers in the 1930s.[2] Lhuillier's shop, Aux travailleurs réunis ("United Workers"), in fact appropriates the name of Les Magasins réunis ("United Stores") to promote the work of small shopkeepers in opposition to the perceived evils of department stores.

These two forms of denunciation are closely tied to a rhetoric of economic antisemitism that targets Jewish shopkeepers for their perceived illegitimate enrichment at the expense of the middle classes. The insult—"dirty kike" ("sale youpin")—shouted upon entering the store was accompanied by a threat: "If you don't close your shop right now, I'll bust it up." In Lhuillier's view, Lerner had enriched himself at the expense of mobilized Frenchmen. To explain the reprobation expressed by other shopkeepers on the Rue du Bourg, the police repeatedly referenced Lerner's relationship to money. The central commissioner noted Lerner's sudden enrichment "at the expense of his competitors,"[3] while the divisional commissioner (*commissaire divisionnaire*) combined the accusation of greed with a charge of commercial impropriety.[4] These accusations, which were echoed by both witnesses and investigators, are part of a long-standing pattern of antisemitic denunciations of alleged Jewish business practices.[5]

While antisemitism was largely absent from the "shirker-mania" of the First World War,[6] the situation was markedly different in the lead-up to the Second World War. The street-level discourse reveals that Lerner became the focal point for these accusations.

The police, the prefect, and the judges: Antisemitism and xenophobia in the government and the judiciary

"Lerner affair. Xenophobic demonstration," reads the handwritten note on the cover of the case file opened at the prefecture. In the immediate aftermath of the ransacking, both the police commissioners and prefecture staff struggled to define the incident and determine an appropriate response. Although the clear violation of property rights could have warranted compensation for the Lerner family, prefect Charles Chevreux—director of the Renseignements généraux (the intelligence service of the national police force) until March 1938[7]—was more concerned with public opinion in Dijon.

The police investigation's initial findings highlight several factors that combined to turn public opinion against Lerner. In its assessment of political temperaments in Dijon,[8] it presents the mob mentality as the confluence

(1) Pierre Birnbaum, Le Peuple et les gros: Histoire d'un mythe (Grasset, 1979), 49; Nonna Mayer, La Boutique contre la gauche (Presses de Sciences Po, 1986), 144.

(2) Zalc, Melting Shops, 196–205 and 217–219.

(3) ADCO, 1090 W 42, report from the central commissioner to the prefect of Côte-d'Or, no. 12865, October 2, 1938.

(4) ADCO, 1090 W 42, report from the central commissioner to the prefect of Côte-d'Or, no. 12865, October 2, 1938.

(5) Francesca Trivellato, *The Promise and Peril of Credit: What a Forgotten Legend about Jews and Finance Tells Us about the Making of European Commercial Society* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

(6) Ridel, Les Embusqués (Armand Colin, 2007), 56.

(7) Archives nationales (AN) (National Archives of France), F/1bI/947.

(8) In the tradition of prefectoral discourse on public opinion and the currents that shape it, see Pierre Karila-Cohen, "Les préfets ne sont pas des collègues: Retour sur une enquête," Genèses 79, no. 2 (2010): 116–134, doi:10.3917/gen.079.0116.

of "anti-fascism directed at an individual whom many believed to be German," "xenophobia among small shopkeepers and certain parts of the working class," and the "indisputable and growing antisemitism spread by activists of certain right-wing parties."[9] The report was submitted to the prefect the same day. While the police officer provided a factual account of the ransacking, the prefect's telegram to the minister of the interior downplayed the gravity of the events: "the facts, in themselves, are not as serious as certain press reports have claimed"; "no particular significance should be attributed to the incident as a whole." Over the course of internal discussions, the prefect began to frame the case in a way that excluded antisemitism as a motivating factor. He attributed the violence instead to the crowd's xenophobia and to Lerner's alleged insensitivity toward his demobilized neighbors. From that point on, the prefecture's position was clear: The events of October 1 did not constitute an antisemitic incident but merely a xenophobic one.

On December 9, 1938, during the hearing of the case brought by Lerner against the individuals held responsible, the criminal court sided with the prefect. Although Lerner argued that antisemitism was the motive behind the ransacking of his stores, the minutes of the hearing state that this claim "does not appear to be consistent with the reality." This claim was justified with a counterexample: "There are many Israelites in Dijon, but none of them—except Lerner—has been subjected to any abuse, either to their person or to their property."[10]

The decision to dismiss antisemitism as a motive reflects the contemporary understandings of both antisemitism and xenophobia. Chevreux's framing of the affair as xenophobic fits within a broader pattern of recriminations against foreigners that had become a recurring feature of the 1930s. The xenophobia of French shopkeepers was seen as understandable in the wake of the economic crisis. Antisemitism, by contrast, was attributed to a marginal fringe of the Dijon population: "In our city, real antisemitic propaganda appears to be the work of a small core of members of the French Faisceau [a fascist political movement], and perhaps also royalists," wrote the central commissioner to the prefect on December 17, 1938.[11] Two days earlier, members of the French Faisceau had posted a flyer on another downtown shop: "Know this, you dirty Jew: There is a team of Frenchmen in your city who have sworn to eliminate you. . . . We will demolish your stores, and a giant pogrom will rid us of your accursed race for good."[12]

As the persecution of the Reich's Jewish population became more widely publicized,[13] the category of antisemitism began to take on new meanings in late 1938. Emphasizing xenophobia in the French context allowed the prefect, whose interpretation was echoed in the judicial handling of the case, to euphemize the phenomenon that was truly at play: the rise of an antisemitism that was inseparable from its attendant xenophobia.

(9) ADCO, 1090 W 42, report no. 12865, October 2, 1938.
(10) ADCO, U 9 CD 168.
(11) ADCO, SM 7504.
(12) ADCO, SM 7504.
(13) Susanne Heim, "L'émigration forcée des Juifs hors d'Allemagne et les réactions des États d'accueil des réfugiés," Revue d'histoire de la Shoah 209, no. 2 (2018): 203–221, 204, doi:10.3917/rhsho.209.0203; Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*; Johanna Linsler, "Les réfugiés juifs en provenance du Reich allemand en France dans les années 1930," in Terre d'exil, terre d'asile: Migrations juives en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles, ed. Colette Zytnicki (Éditions de l'Éclat, 2010), 29–47, doi:10.3917/ecla.zytni.2010.01.0029.

The denial of the antisemitic nature of the incidents therefore amounted to a means of distancing them from German antisemitism and replacing it with a French xenophobia that remained politically tolerable to the police and administrative authorities.[1] The reclassification of the Lerner attack as a purely xenophobic incident reveals a distinction between a presentable, French xenophobia—a deep-seated problem stemming from a national commercial sector viewed as threatened by unfair foreign competition[2]—and an antisemitism considered an unacceptable fringe phenomenon. It was precisely at a moment when antisemitism—which was growing increasingly virulent within the small-business community[3]—began to draw strength from its xenophobic tradition that the need to draw a distinction between these categories became evident. The varying uses of these terms reflect the shifting boundaries between them in a Europe where anti-Jewish persecution was on the rise.

Naming . . . and taking action

On October 12, 1938, on the recommendation of the prefect of Côte-d'Or and with the approval of the minister of the interior, Lerner was expelled from France. He and his in-laws were given one month to leave the country.

Paradoxically, it was the xenophobic nature of the event that was invoked to justify the expulsion order. "[This] expulsion decision [is intended] not only to sanction particularly serious acts, but also to serve as an example to foreign elements who have not observed the proper standards of conduct during the recent period," wrote the director of Sûreté nationale, France's former domestic intelligence force, to the prefect of Côte-d'Or.[4] Lerner was thus expelled in order to set an example: Although the prefect admitted that it was not possible to establish the facts of which he was accused, the expulsion served as a gesture of support toward the city's shopkeepers[5] while removing the presumed cause of the unrest. The prefect sped up the resolution of the affair with the aim of restoring public order. This justification, in fact, gave him *carte blanche*, as the administration held "full discretionary power"[6] in such matters.

Lerner's expulsion was the product of two logics. First, endorsing a xenophobic reading of the event implied that the shopkeeper was to blame for his own misfortune. By contrast, acknowledging an antisemitic motive would have cast Lerner as an innocent victim and thereby worsened the scandal. Second, and more crucially, the expulsion aligned with the administrative management of foreigners that

(1) Vicky Caron notes that this interpretation appears in part of the historiography of 1930s antisemitism, particularly in the works of Eugen Weber and Richard Millman. Caron, *Uneasy Asylum*, 8.

(2) Unfair competition is an accusation implicitly present in the depositions, even if the term itself is never used. Mrs. Lhuillier is quoted as saying: "It's unfortunate to see our husbands mobilized to go to war [illegible] foreigners [illegible] quietly at home running their business; they deserve to have their shops shut down." On these practices of commercial discrimination, see Zalc, Melting Shops; Julie Fette, Exclusions: Practicing Prejudice in French Law and Medicine, 1920–1945 (Cornell University Press, 2012), 36; Gerlach, The Extermination of the European Jews, 337.

(3) Zalc, Melting Shops, 213–214.

(4) ADCO, 1090 W 42, letter dated November 21, 1938.

(5) The Dijon Chamber of Commerce called for stricter criminal oversight of foreign traders deemed responsible for "criminal and dishonest acts." Bulletin trimestriel de la Chambre de commerce de Dijon, sessions of November 15, 1937, and April 25, 1938.

(6) Danièle Lochak, "Les politiques de l'immigration au prisme de la législation sur les étrangers," in Les Lois de l'inhospitalité: Les politiques de l'immigration à l'épreuve des sans-papiers, ed. Didier Fassin, Alain Morice, and Catherine Quiminal (La Découverte, 1997), 29–45, doi:10.3917/dec.fassi.1997.01.0029.

had been routine practice since 1932.[7] In this sense, the way the prefect chose to qualify the incident was directly shaped by the procedural mechanism he employed to bring it to a close. This administrative framework, however, was not hegemonic.

The "Rue du Bourg affair": A laborious scandal-making process

"Did Mr. Lerner shout 'Long live war!' or is he the victim of a cabal?" This was the question posed by the Club du Faubourg, a Parisian debating society, in the title of a session scheduled for October 1938, where "accusers, defenders, and witnesses" of the ransacking were to confront one another.[8] What began as a local news item in the regional press thus entered one of the major political and intellectual forums of the interwar period in just five days.[9]

An unfinished affaire

The Rue du Bourg affair was certainly not a political crisis on the scale of the Dreyfus affair, or even of other major, now-forgotten affairs.[10] The scandalization process did not fully come to fruition. Nevertheless, the affair offers a remarkable vantage point for examining the political, media, and legal networks that sought to politicize the event.

The morning after the looting, the regional press reported it as a regrettable incident. It was only after Lerner's expulsion order was issued and the ensuing legal proceedings had begun, however, that the events truly took on the contours of an "affair."[11] The Socialist press, Communist newspapers, and publications affiliated with LICA seized upon this manifestly unjust situation to voice their indignation. How could a republican administration expel a victim?

Despite the unanimous condemnation of Lerner's fate in the left-wing press, the affair never truly gained traction in public debate, for at least three reasons. First, amid the fierce competition for attention among the events that filled the daily news,[12] and coming as it did in the wake of a news cycle already saturated with all the ink spilled over the Munich Agreement, Lerner's cause struggled to stand out. It was understood at most as a variation on broader international themes. Second, following Munich, most organizations that claimed to represent French Jewish communities, including those on the Left, advocated discretion.[13] Political activism was believed to put the Jews of France at risk, especially immigrant Jews.[14] Finally, Lerner's status as a foreigner may have worked against him. Three weeks after the ransacking, Lucien Dreyfus,

(7) Jean-Charles Bonnet, Les Pouvoirs publics français et l'immigration dans l'entre-deux-guerres (Centre d'histoire économique et sociale de la région lyonnaise, 1976), 268–270; Janine Ponty, Polonais méconnus: Histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres (Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1988), 304.

(8) Centre de documentation juive contemporaine (CDJC) (Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation), CMXCVI, II-784, invitation from Léo Poldès to Mathis Lerner, October 5, 1938.

(9) Claire Lemercier, "Le Club du Faubourg, 'Forum' et 'Journal Parlé': Une tentative d'innovation dans les circuits d'information et de débat de l'entre-deux-guerres," Cahiers d'histoire 66 (1997): 63–74.

(10) For example, Florence Tamagne, "Le 'crime du Palace': Homosexualité, médias et politique dans la France des années 1930," Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine 53–4, no. 4 (2006): 128–149, doi:10.3917/rhmc.534.0128.

(11) Elisabeth Claverie, "Procès, affaire, cause: Voltaire et l'innovation critique," Politix 26, no/ 7 (1994): 76–85, 84, doi:10.3406/polix.1994.1843.

(12) Dominique Kalifa, "Qu'est-ce qu'une affaire au XIXe siècle?," in Affaires, scandales et grandes causes: De Socrate à Pinochet, ed. Luc Boltanski, Elisabeth Claverie, Nicolas Offenstadt, and Stéphane Van Damme (Stock, 2007), 197–211, 210.

(13) Paula Hyman, *From Dreyfus to Vichy: The Remaking of French Jewry*, 1906–1959 (Columbia University Press, 1979), 230; David H. Weinberg, A Community on Trial: The Jews of Paris in the 1930s (University of Chicago Press, 1977), 180–181.

(14) Weinberg, A Community on Trial.

a high school teacher from Strasbourg, who was a regular contributor to *La* Tribune Juive ("The Jewish Tribune"), published an article that raised this point in comparing the emerging Lerner affair with the Dreyfus affair. In both cases, he noted, his fellow Jews were reluctant to denounce the slander of the victim—suggesting that, in Lerner's case, the apathy of French Jews was tied to the fact that Lerner was a foreigner.[1]

These factors played a role in pushing the Lerner affair into relative obscurity. In response to a letter from Bernard Lecache proposing an article on Lerner—in which he wrote that "I'm sure you will agree that this scandal is serious enough to bring it to the attention of Paris-Soir's readers"[2]—Pierre Lazareff, the paper's managing editor, gave no reply. As a result, Paris-Soir, the highest-circulation national newspaper of the time,[3] never mentioned Lerner. Among the actors mobilized in his defense, including the Ligue des droits de l'Homme (LDH) (Human Rights League), the most active was LICA. The organization wavered between launching a media campaign and providing discreet behind-the-scenes support.

To spark or to avoid scandal?

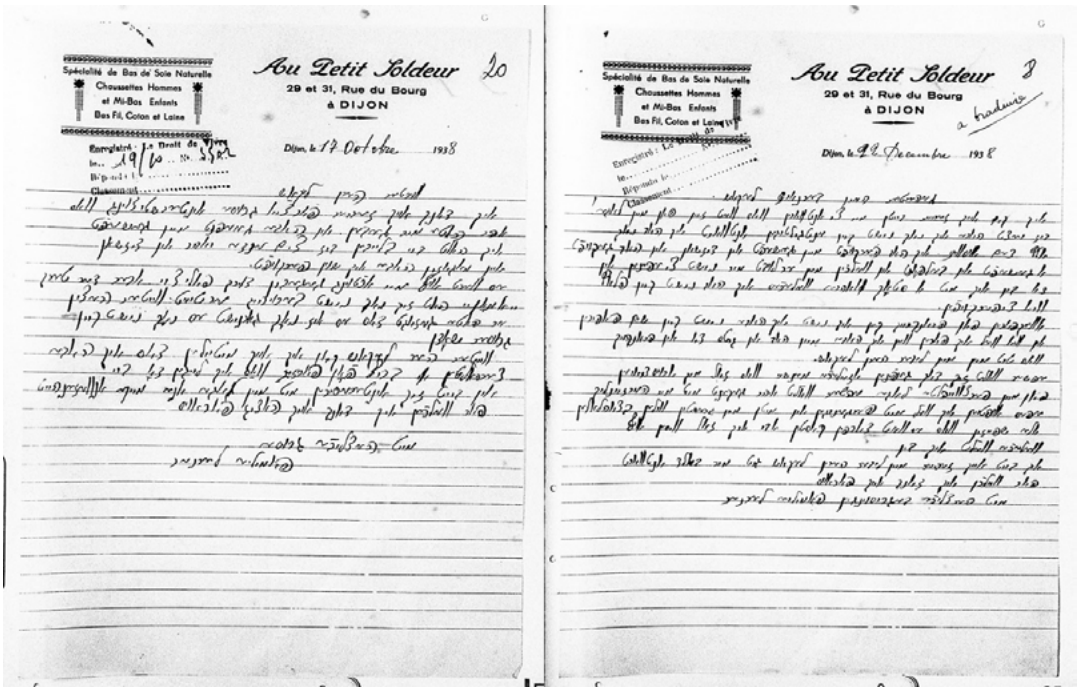

Fig. 1. The Lerners' exchange with the president of LICA (in Yiddish)

Source: The Shoah Memorial (Paris), LICA collection, CMXCVI/53, file 784, documents no. 8 and 20, two letters addressed to Bernard Lecache (October 17 and December 22, 1938). Translation of left page followed by right page.

(1) See Afoumado, "Les relations entre 'Israélites français' et Juifs immigrés," 128.
(2) CDJC, LICA archives, CMXCVI/53/784, October 29, 1938.
(3) Christophe Charle, Le Siècle de la presse (1830–1939) (Seuil, 2004), 265.

Dear Mr. Lecache,
Please accept my sincere thanks for the invaluable support you have shown me. I have been able to reopen my shop and hope to remain in Dijon until the end of the year. One of the two establishments has already been sold.
The police are keeping a close eye on me,[4] but Amon[5] remains unsettled. Hostile sentiments continue to be stirred up around me. I was told: "It is nothing at all, there has been no collateral damage."
Mr. Lecache, I could continue to describe the many difficulties I am facing, beyond what I have written here. I respectfully ask that you intervene, following the indications I shall soon provide, and I thank you most warmly in advance for your assistance.
With warmest regards,
The Lerner Family

Dear Mr. Bernard Lecache,
I am deeply grateful to you for responding to me given the uncertain situation I find myself in!
As of now, I have received no definitive answer. I still have every reason for concern. I have sold my shop in Dijon and purchased another in Belfort, but I am not permitted to open it. I remain here with a full stock of merchandise, but nowhere to sell it.
I am unable to leave France. I have no damned papers, and when I do obtain them, I shall go far away. All my possessions remain here in France. What are we to do, dear Mr. Lecache?
Perhaps there are people who might help me out of this desperate predicament. Perhaps you would agree to receive me in person. Should that be the case, I will gladly bear any expenses required, provided I can count on even the slightest assurance.
My dear Mr. Lecache, I earnestly entreat you to reply, and I thank you in advance.
With warmest regards,
The Lerner Family

As early as October 2, 1938, the president of LICA took steps to manage the media coverage of the events. In a letter to the editor of *Le* Petit Parisien, Lecache refuted the claim that Lerner had shouted "Long live war!"[6] Around the same time, Lerner's wife, Jenta Obarzanek, sought to launch a public opinion campaign. She is said to have sent a letter to L'Œuvre denying the rumor of her husband's supposed belligerent outburst. The shared content of Lecache's and Obarzanek's letters—as well as their meeting, recorded in the LICA archives[7]—indicates that this was a coordinated initiative. On October 8, Lecache published Obarzanek's testimony in his newspaper, Le Droit de vivre ("The Right to Live"), alongside eight other accounts from victims of antisemitic acts. These efforts to publicize the case were accompanied by concrete measures to support the victims (see Figure 1).

As part of this media campaign, the issue of how to characterize the ransacking reemerged. It was to LICA that Lerner turned for his defense,[8] and it was as "yet another victim of the abominable antisemitic movement currently raging in France"[9] that the organization chose to represent him. While the authorities remained hesitant to acknowledge the antisemitic nature of the attack, its characterization emerged as a key point of contention.

(4) The meaning of the Yiddish is ambiguous here: both "to watch closely" and "to protect." Our thanks to Sophie Leconte for translating these two letters from Yiddish.
(5) Raphaël Amon, one of his neighbors, who called on Lerner's customers to boycott him.
(6) CDJC, CMXCVI/53/784.
(7) CDJC, CMXCVI/80/1274.
(8) However, it is not possible to confirm whether Lerner was already a member of the League—whose Dijon section was still in formation in 1938—nor to determine whether it was Lerner or the president of LICA who initiated contact.
(9) CDJC, CMXCVI/53/784, Lecache to the director of Le Petit Parisien.

The focus of support shifted following the expulsion order: The initial goal of publicizing the case gave way to the need to secure legal protection for the Lerners. To this end, LICA drew on its socialist political networks. On November 3, the League sent a letter signed by Lazare Rachline,[1] chairman of its asylum commission, requesting assistance from Robert Jardillier, the mayor of Dijon and a fellow Socialist. At the time of the trial, Marcel Bloch was appointed to represent Lerner.[2] A member of both the executive committee of the Parti socialiste (Socialist Party) and the Seine federation of LICA,[3] Bloch had previously defended the merchant in Nancy whose store was ransacked in September 1938.[4] A few months later, another Socialist, René Rücklin, a former deputy from Doubs,[5] represented Lerner in the appeal. Although the outcome of the trial was not particularly favorable, entering the judicial system offered the Lerners a major advantage: It allowed them to remain in France for the duration of the proceedings because they were still considered "useful to the administration of justice"[6] until the appeal had run its course. Ultimately, the expulsion order was not revoked, but the family was permitted to remain in Belfort and later in Vesoul.

The Lerner case thus did not take on the aspect of a true "affair." However, this limited reception can also be understood as part of a broader defense strategy: The relatively moderate impact of the affair allowed the Lerner couple to remain in France and resume their business activities after the trial. In the days following the ransacking, Bernard Lecache, who was otherwise a regular participant in Club du Faubourg debates, declined, on Lerner's behalf, an invitation from its president, Léo Poldès.[7]

The indifference to the Lerner affair in France, along with LICA's discreet activism, stands in stark contrast to the reception it received across the Rhine: The Nazi press seized on the incident, and after Kristallnacht, it was sensationalized in Reich propaganda to reinforce the image of a belligerent Jewry.

The transnational itinerary of a French news item

In just one day, news of the attack on Lerner had crossed the Rhine.[8] On October 3, the morning edition of the Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro (DNB), the Nazi state news agency since 1934, published a lengthy article on the incident hitting the French press.[9] It reported that "actual pogroms against the Jews" had occurred after a Jewish "rag dealer" allegedly shouted "Long live war." While it drew on reports from the Parisian press, the DNB also wrote that the crowd ultimately marched in procession through the streets of the city calling for the expulsion of Jews from France.

(1) CDJC, CMXCVI/53/784, letter from Otto Rosenstrauch to Jean Blau, November 2, 1938.
(2) CDJC, CMXCVI/53/784, Otto Rosenstrauch to Marcel Bloch, November 2, 1938.
(3) Le Droit de vivre, June 25, 1938, 3, accessed June 09, 2025, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1820880f/f3.item.
(4) CDJC, CMXCVI/53/784, Otto Rosenstrauch to Marcel Bloch, November 2, 1938.
(5) Jean Jolly, ed., Dictionnaire des parlementaires français, vol. 8 (PUF, 1960), 2933.
(6) ADCO, 1090 W 42, letter from the minister of the interior to the prefect, November 21, 1938.
(7) Bernard Lecache to Léo Poldès, October 19, 1938. In September 1938, the Yiddish-language Communist press was already advising Jewish immigrants to avoid participating in public discussions in order to protect themselves from potential aggression. Weinberg, A Community on Trial.
(8) In this sense, it was a transnational media event. See Norman Domeier, "A Scream, Then Silence: Kristallnacht and the American Journalists in Nazi Germany—The 'Night of Broken Glass' as an Unwanted Transnational Media Event," in New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi Pogrom in Global Comparison, ed. Steven J. Ross and Wolf Gruner (Purdue University Press, 2019), 91–114, doi:10.2307/j.ctvh9w1k7.9.
(9) Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro, October 3, 1938, accessed July 17, 2025, https://dfg-viewer.de/show/?set[mets]=https://content.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/zefys/SNP27058621-19381003-2-0-0.xml.

This piece of international news was carefully selected by the DNB editorial staff to supply content for the Reich's newspapers, for which the agency functioned as the sole transmission channel.[10] Reframed by the Nazi press, the Lerner case served as an external example for domestic propaganda. On October 3, 1938, Der Führer, one of the most widely circulated Nazi newspapers in the Baden district, devoted part of its front page to the events in Dijon. In Durlach, on the Franco-German border, the local paper Durlacher Tagblatt ("Durlach Daily") did the same. The Austrian press, which had already been under DNB supervision for several months, also picked up the story: It appeared in the prominent Neues Wiener Tagblatt ("New Vienna Daily"), a bourgeois-conservative Viennese newspaper, as well as in Tyrol's leading paper, the Catholic Innsbrucker Nachrichten ("Innsbruck News"). It also appeared in the Deutsche Zeitung ("German Newspaper"), aimed at the German-speaking population of southern Estonia. As late as October 18, the Völkischer Beobachter ("People's Observer") reported on the "anti-Jewish demonstrations" in Dijon, and on November 19, in western Austria, the Vorarlberger Tagblatt ("Vorarlberg Daily") continued to mention Lerner in connection with "international Jewry."

Why did the German Embassy in France produce consular reports on the events of October 1938,[11] and why was the Nazi press so eager to spread the news? Because the incident served as "proof—from France" of the resistance of French shopkeepers to the so-called "Jewish war." The exploitation of the Lerner affair did not end there. In 1939, at the same time as the Ministry of Propaganda was using every means at its disposal to justify Kristallnacht, Wolfgang Diewerge—Goebbels's adviser on antisemitic propaganda after the assassination of Ernst vom Rath—cited Lerner in a brochure about the Grynszpan trial that was widely circulated throughout the Reich.[12]

The Lerner case resurfaced in France via Nazi propaganda in various ways. On the evening of October 3, 1938, the German radio reported a "battle between French and Israelite shopkeepers," a broadcast that reportedly caused alarm among the "Israelite families of Dijon."[13] The Nazi interpretation of the ransacking also reemerged in France in the writings of French ideologues on the German payroll, such as Paul Ferdonnet,[14] whose 1938 book La Guerre juive ("The Jewish War") closes with a reference to Lerner's alleged warmongering. Ferdonnet's account of the Lerner affair, which draws heavily on material from Der Stürmer ("The Stormer"),[15] likely relied more on the German interpretation of the events than on the French press.

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The Lerner case is striking in its many metamorphoses: a riot composed of disparate elements, according to police reports; a xenophobic disturbance of public order, according

(10) André Uzulis, Nachrichtenagenturen im Nationalsozialismus: Propagandainstrumente und Mittel der Presselenkung (Peter Lang, 1995), 193.

(11) Marrus and Paxton, Vichy France and the Jews, 380, note 50.

(12) Wolfgang Benz, "*Anschlag gegen den Frieden*," in Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart, ed. Wolfgang Benz (De Gruyter, 2013), 19–20. Herschel Grynszpan was a young Polish Jew who shot embassy secretary Ernst vom Rath in Paris on November 7, 1938.

(13) AN, 19940466/6, letter from the divisional commissioner to the prefect.

(14) See Pascal Ory, Les Collaborateurs, 1940–1945 (Seuil, 1980).

(15) Dietrich Orlow, The Lure of Fascism in Western Europe: German Nazis, Dutch and French Fascists, 1933–1939 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 131.

to the prefect; and an anti-Jewish pogrom, according to both Lerner's defenders and Nazi propaganda. For LICA—formerly the Ligue contre les pogroms (League Against Pogroms)—calling the event a pogrom was a way of framing it as part of a long history of antisemitic violence. Nazi propaganda, for its part, used the term to reveal the supposed hostility of the French people toward Jews.

Finally, the term "pogrom" raises questions not only about how the Lerner case should be classified, but also about the French and broader European historical chronology into which it might fit. There is no scholarly consensus on the definition of a pogrom: Paul Brass, for instance, emphasizes the involvement of central authorities[1]—a criterion that does not apply to the Lerner case—while John Klier focuses on mass, spontaneous violence directed at a subordinate ethnic group.[2] Rather than approaching the issue solely as an exercise in classification[3]—that is, attempting to determine whether a given event fits a definition that remains contested[4]—we might instead reverse the perspective and ask what the term "pogrom" allows us to understand about the Lerner case.

As we have noted, although the attack on Lerner and his family was shaped from the outset by antisemitic accusations, it did not constitute mass violence against Jews as a group.[5] The fact that the ransacking was personal and part of a localized context of commercial rivalry makes the incident an antisemitic mob attack, but one that does not follow the patterns of violence seen in the early nineteenth century in Germany and the Russian Empire. This narrow definition of a "pogrom," however, fails to reflect how the term was understood and used by those involved in the event.[6]

Among the five criteria identified by the American historian David Engel in his typology of pogroms,[7] two are particularly relevant here. Engel suggests that pogroms occur in societies marked by strong ethno-racial divisions. This was not the case for metropolitan France in 1938, where racial categories had no administrative status, unlike in Poland and Germany. Yet we would argue that at a moment when the distinction between national and foreigner was shaping social divisions on the Rue du Bourg—between mobilized and foreign shopkeepers—the instability of national identity was expressed there in racial terms, such that the violence of the evening of October 1, 1938 was ultimately shaped by ethno-racial divisions. Engel also points to the moral contract that underpins pogroms: Perpetrators act against members of a subordinate group when they feel that an upended social hierarchy is not being properly restored by the legitimate agents of state violence. With this in mind, we

(1) Paul R. Brass, ed., Riots and Pogroms (New York University Press, 1996), 33.

(2) John D. Klier, "The Pogrom Paradigm in Russian History," in Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History, ed. John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13–38; Elissa Bemporad and Thomas Chopard, "The Pogroms of the Russian Civil War at 100: New Trends, New Sources," Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History 15 (2019): 5–20, doi:10.48248/issn.2037-741X/40

(3) André Loez, Gérard Noiriel, and Philippe Olivera, "Michel Dobry: 'Penser = classer?' Entretien avec André Loez, Gérard Noiriel et Philippe Olivera," Genèses 59, no. 2 (2005): 151–165, doi:10.3917/gen.059.0151.

(4) Werner Bergmann, "Pogrome," in Internationales Handbuch der Gewaltforschung, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer and John Hagan (Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002), 441–460; Werner Bergmann, "Pogrom," in Handbuch des Antisemitismus, vol. 3, *Begriffe*, *Theorien*, *Ideologien*, ed. Brigitte Mihok and Wolfgang Benz (De Gruyter, 2010), 269–270.

(5) Donald L. Horowitz, The Deadly Ethnic Riot (University of California Press, 2001).

(6) David Engel, "What's in a Pogrom? European Jews in the Age of Violence," in Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History, ed. Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, David Gaunt, Natan M. Meir, and Israel Bartal (Indiana University Press, 2011), 19–37, 21.

(7) Engel, "What's in a Pogrom?," 22–24.

can revisit the earlier hypothesis regarding the prefect's decision—that expelling Lerner was a means of symbolically restoring order—and advance a new one regarding the role of vigilantism: that Lhuillier orchestrated the pogrom because France's legal protections for national merchants no longer offered a means of targeting established foreign competitors.[8]

These elements lend credence to the notion that the Lerner affair should be interpreted as a pogrom in 1930s Dijon. However, how the case is defined and whether it was exceptional remain open to debate, particularly in light of other episodes of looting that targeted Jewish shops in France and Europe in the 1930s. Documenting such episodes would contribute to a historiography of antisemitism that would bring to light France's concrete role in the anti-Jewish violence of the 1930s—contrary to notions of a mere "undercurrent of hostility"[9] toward Jews.

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Translated and edited by Cadenza Academic Translations
Translator: Adam Lozier, Editor: Sophie Borresen, Senior editor: Mark Mellor

— Un pogrom antijuif dans le Dijon des années 1930 ? Cet article montre que le saccage, en 1938, de deux magasins au centre d'une ville française constitue un site d'observation stratégique pour l'étude des manifestations de violence collective antijuives. L'approche micro-historique permet d'examiner les facteurs qui précipitent le saccage et les conditions administratives, judiciaires et médiatiques de sa réception. Cette affaire est à la fois un fait divers qui peine à se singulariser dans la presse française et un événement médiatique européen à la veille de la nuit de Cristal. Cet article discute finalement ce que l'usage du terme « pogrom » permet de comprendre de la situation violente dans laquelle s'insère cet événement.

— An anti-Jewish pogrom in 1930s Dijon? This article argues that the looting of two stores in the center of this French city in 1938 is a strategic vantage point from which to study anti-Jewish collective violence. This micro-historical approach enables us to examine the factors that precipitated the looting, as well as the administrative, judicial, and media conditions that framed its occurrence. The "Lerner affair" was both a news item lost among countless others in the French press, and a major European media event on the eve of Kristallnacht. Finally, this article discusses how the use of the term "pogrom" allows us to understand the violent context in which this event took place.

(8) Claire Zalc, "De la liberté du commerce pour tous à la carte de commerçant étranger (19e siècle –1938)," in Petites Entreprises et petits entrepreneurs étrangers en France (19e–20e siècle), ed. Anne-Sophie Bruno and Claire Zalc (Publibook, 2006), 29–48, 42.

(9) Schor, L'Antisémitisme en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres, 63.