Anti-Semitism: Alfred Dreyfus & “The Affair”

The Dreyfus case underscored and intensified bitter divisions within French politics and society. The fact that it followed other scandals — the Boulanger affair, the Wilson case, and the bribery of government officials and journalists that was associated with the financing of the Panama Canal — suggested that the young French Republic was in danger of collapse. The controversy involved critical institutions and issues, including monarchists and republicans, the political parties, the Catholic Church, the army, and strong anti-Semitic sentiment.

Alfred Dreyfus, an obscure captain in the French army, came from a Jewish family that had left its native Alsace for Paris when Germany annexed that province in 1871. In 1894 papers discovered in a wastebasket in the office of a German military attaché made it appear that a French military officer was providing secret information to the German government. Dreyfus came under suspicion, probably because he was a Jew and also because he had access to the type of information that had been supplied to the German agent. The army authorities declared that Dreyfus’ handwriting was similar to that on the papers. Despite his protestations of innocence he was found guilty of treason in a secret military court-martial, during which he was denied the right to examine the evidence against him. The army stripped him of his rank in a humiliating ceremony and shipped him off to [life imprisonment on] Devil’s Island, a penal colony located off the coast of South America. The political right, whose strength was steadily increasing, cited Dreyfus’ alleged espionage as further evidence of the failures of the Republic. Édouard Drumont’s right-wing newspaper La Libre Parole intensified its attacks on the Jews, portraying this incident as further evidence of Jewish treachery.

Dreyfus seemed destined to die in disgrace. He had few defenders, and anti-Semitism was rampant in the French army. An unlikely defender came to his rescue, motivated not by sympathy for Dreyfus but by the evidence that he had been “railroaded” and that the officer who had actually committed espionage remained in position to do further damage. Lieutenant Colonel Georges Picquart, an unapologetic anti-Semite, was appointed chief of army intelligence two years after Dreyfus was convicted. Picquart, after examining the evidence and investigating the affair in
greater detail, concluded that the guilty officer was a Major named Walsin Esterhazy. Picquart soon discovered, however, that the army was more concerned about preserving its image than rectifying its error, and when he persisted in attempting to reopen the case the army transferred him to Tunisia. A military court then acquitted Esterhazy, ignoring the convincing evidence of his guilt.

"The Affair" might have ended then but for the determined intervention of the novelist Émile Zola, who published his denunciation ("J'accuse!") of the army cover-up in a daily newspaper. [Note: Zola was found guilty of libeling the army and was sentenced to imprisonment. He fled to England, where he remained until being granted amnesty.] At this point public passion became more aroused than ever, as the political right and the leadership of the Catholic Church — both of which were openly hostile to the Republic — declared the Dreyfus case to be a conspiracy of Jews and Freemasons designed to damage the prestige of the army and thereby destroy France.

Sometime later another military officer discovered that additional documents had been added to the Dreyfus file. He determined that a lieutenant colonel (Hubert Henry) had forged the documents — which seemed to strengthen the case against Dreyfus — in anticipation that Dreyfus would be given a new trial. Immediately after an interrogation the lieutenant colonel committed suicide. In 1899 the army did in fact conduct a new court-martial which again found Dreyfus guilty and condemned him to 10 years detention, although it observed that there were "extenuating circumstances."

In September 1899, the president of France pardoned Dreyfus, thereby making it possible for him to return to Paris, but he had to wait until 1906 — twelve years after the case had begun — to be exonerated of the charges, after which he was restored to his former military rank.

"The Affair" had inspired moderate republicans, Radicals, and socialists to work together, and the ultimate exoneration of Dreyfus strengthened the Republic, in no small part because of the conduct of its enemies, most notably the army and the Catholic hierarchy. In 1905 the Radical party, emphasizing the role of the Catholic leadership in the Dreyfus case, succeeded in passing legislation separating church and state.

Sources: The Affair - The Case of Alfred Dreyfus. Homepage of Michael Sinclair

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Alfred Dreyfus and “The Affair”

Alfred Dreyfus, an obscure captain in the French army, came from a Jewish family that had left its native Alsace for Paris. In 1894 papers discovered in a wastebasket in the office of a German military attaché made it appear that a French military officer was providing secret information to the German government. Dreyfus came under suspicion, probably because he was a Jew and also because he had access to the type of information that had been supplied to the German agent. The army authorities declared that Dreyfus’ handwriting was similar to that on the papers. Despite his protestations of innocence he was found guilty of treason in a secret military court-martial, during which he was denied the right to examine the evidence against him. The army stripped him of his rank in a humiliating ceremony and shipped him off to [life imprisonment on] Devil’s Island, a penal colony located off the coast of South America. The political right, whose strength was steadily increasing, cited Dreyfus’ alleged espionage as further evidence of the failures of the Republic. Édouard Drumont’s right-wing newspaper La Libre Parole intensified its attacks on the Jews, portraying this incident as evidence of Jewish treachery.

1. What were the accusations against Alfred Dreyfus? Why was Dreyfus accused of these crimes?

2. What rights were denied Dreyfus after he was accused?

3. How was the Dreyfus affair portrayed by the media?

Dreyfus seemed destined to die in disgrace. He had few defenders, and anti-Semitism was rampant in the French army.

4. What is anti-Semitism? How did anti-Semitism contribute to the Dreyfus affair?

The Dreyfus affair was a watershed event in the history of European anti-Semitism. World Jewry was stunned that such an affair could occur in France, the cradle of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The fact that the public, including nobles and members of the clergy, saw Dreyfus—an assimilated Jew—as an outsider seemed to suggest that assimilation was no longer a defense against anti-Semitism.

The Dreyfus affair also personally impacted a significant figure in Jewish history. Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, reported on the Dreyfus scandal as a young correspondent for a Viennese...
newspaper. For many, it was clear that Dreyfus had been guilty of little more than being a successful Jew in Catholic France. The Dreyfus Affair demonstrated to Herzl that if France could play host to virulent anti-Semitism, Jews could not be secure anywhere. What the Jews needed was a land of their own in which they would form a majority of citizens.

5. Why was the Dreyfus affair a “watershed event” in the history of European anti-Semitism?

6. What did the Dreyfus affair demonstrate to Herzl?

Sources:


"Leur Patrie" ("Their Homeland")
La Libre Parole - October 28, 1893
“Leur Patrie” (“Their Homeland”)
La Libre Parole - October 28, 1893

Books like Eduard Drumont’s La France Juive and, of course, his weekly illustrated magazine updated the medieval trope of the “wandering Jew” to reference 19th century concerns about loyalty to one’s racial and cultural “patrie,” over abstract concepts of European and international identity. Reflecting the anti-Semitic’s belief that the Jew’s national loyalty extends only so far as his personal finances, in this image the pan-national “embrace” of this caricatured rag-picker is a stifling one. Here the Jew with no country makes his mark world-wide, digging in his “claws” everywhere and anywhere money is to be had.

It is no small irony that at the time Esnault conjured this fiction, such a figure’s real-life analogue would have been the French Republic, which had at that point claimed a stake in almost every continent, draining the resources of over forty protectorates and colonies in Western and Equatorial Africa, Oceania, and South East Asia.

“A propos de Judas Dreyfus” (Concerning Judas Dreyfus)
La Libre Parole, November 10, 1894
“A propos de Judas Dreyfus” (Concerning Judas Dreyfus)
La Libre Parole, November 10, 1894

Chanteclair's caricature, the original of which appeared in Edmond Drumot's virulently anti-Dreyfusard weekly La Libre Parole illustrée, was published shortly after Dreyfus's original arrest for treason in October 1894. Since the publication of La France Juive in 1886, Drumont had kept up a barrage of anti-Semitic polemic, as the stack of volumes at his side here suggests. In 1889, Drumont founded the Ligue Nationale antisémite de France and promoted caricaturist Adolphe Willette as a candidate for Montmartre in that year's elections.

Chanteclair's illustration represents Drumont as a colossus whose intellectual and physical prowess dwarfs the powerless Dreyfus. Rather than touch the Captain and so contaminate himself, Drumont uses pinchers to push Dreyfus, here a guttersnipe or piece of refuse wearing a German pickelhaube helmet, into the drain. Behind them stands a proud soldier bathed in sunlight: a symbol for the nation's new dawn.

Focus Question: How did the Dreyfus Affair and Russian pogroms reflect broader anti-Semitism across France and Europe?

Directions:
1) Use the three political cartoons about the Dreyfus Affair and the two primary source readings about the pogroms to fill out the following graphic organizer. The first is partially completed for you as an example.

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<th>When and where is the document from?</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Political Cartoon</td>
<td>La Libre Parole (French magazine) on October 28, 1893</td>
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**DESCRIPTION OF SOURCE**
*What is the document about? (Use a bullet-pointed list.)*

- Anti-Semitic caricature

**MEANING**
*How does this point explain/support the main idea of the document?*

**MAIN IDEA/THESIS:** What is the main idea or thesis of this document?

**EVIDENCE FROM THE DOCUMENT TO SUPPORT THIS POINT (MEANING)**

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**MEANING**
*How does this point explain/support the main idea of the document?*

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