

THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

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Some historians have said that the 20th century didn't really begin on January 1, 1900 or January 1, 1901 for the purists but on September 26, 1894 when a crumpled piece of paper was found in the wastebasket of the German Embassy in Paris. This touched off the so-called Dreyfus Affair, which from this point forward I will refer to simply as The Affair. It is also often mentioned as the first act of the Holocaust since Dreyfus was the only Jewish member of the elite French General Staff, where the incriminating evidence had to have originated. There is an alternative theory about the Affair which I will discuss at the end. The Affair had roots going back more than a century and we will cover that first. Before we start I want to warn everyone that I do not speak French and I'm sure I will butcher some of the pronunciations, so please bear with me.

The American Revolution in effect changed very little; the colonists were merely demanding the rights of Englishmen and eventually decided this could only be achieved by full independence from Great Britain. Afterwards English common law prevailed and a Republic was established; the only real differences were the absence of a monarch and titled nobility. An oft quoted statement by John Adams, one of the Founding Fathers, was that the colonists at the time of the Revolution were one third revolutionaries, one third Loyalists and one third indifferent. This may or may not be an accurate quote but clearly it was not correct in terms of the depths of dedication by the various factions. The Loyalists were far less dedicated to the status quo than the revolutionaries and after the signing of a peace treaty, most Loyalists gradually assimilated into the new regime and within a generation loyalist sentiment was extinguished.

On the other hand, the French Revolution (inspired by the American example) represented a total upheaval of French society. Prior to 1789 France was essentially an absolute monarchy with no representative institutions and all power in the hands of a tiny aristocracy, centered on the King. The Catholic Church was one of the pillars of the establishment and deeply resented by many of the common people. When the revolutionary elements took over the government they quickly dismantled the old regime, confiscated church lands and began a reign of terror, slaughtering not only aristocrats but many nuns and priests. The remaining aristocrats fled and made common cause with the enemies of the Revolution, essentially all the other countries in Europe. Things became even more strained when the King was guillotined in 1793. The country was split down the middle and even the relative peace imposed by Napoleon after he seized power in 1799 only papered over the fundamental differences of a republic vs. a monarchy, an established Church vs. anti-clericalism, aristocracy vs. near universal suffrage, free market capitalism vs. old style mercantilism and equal rights for all vs. the persecution of certain groups, such as Protestants and Jews. In fact the liberation of the Jews, despite the fact they were only a tiny minority of the population was one of the key reforms of the Revolution and endorsed by Napoleon but deeply resented by traditional elements.

Louis XVIII, a younger brother of the last Bourbon king, was restored to the throne after the overthrow of Napoleon and pursued a moderate course but on his death in 1824 he was succeeded by his ultra-reactionary brother who took the title of Charles X and immediately tried to restore all the trappings of the old regime. It was said that the Bourbons learned nothing and forgot nothing; this led to his overthrow in 1830. He was succeeded by a cousin from the Orleanist branch of the family who agreed to a constitution and ruled as Louis Philippe, the so-called "Citizen King". Louis Philippe became a victim of the year of revolution in 1848 and a French republic was declared but this was soon replaced by the Second Empire in the person of Louis Napoleon aka Napoleon III, a nephew of the great Napoleon. Louis walked a tightrope between the extremes of the right and left and despite several serious foreign policy and domestic blunders lasted until the Franco-Prussian War which began disastrously with the capture of Napoleon III and his abdication in 1870.

The people of Paris refused to accept defeat, declared a republic and vowed to fight on forcing the Prussians to besiege the city which finally fell in January 1871. This sparked both the founding of the new German Empire and the Paris Commune which was brutally suppressed by the French government. The Commune achieved a cult status among left wing and socialist groups all over Europe out of all proportion to its' actual accomplishments. Thousands of Communards and even some innocent civilians were slaughtered during the suppression but during its ascendancy the Commune killed many priests, nuns and other representatives of the old regime. This hardened the split between right and left.

Incredibly the newly elected national assembly was staunchly royalist and a deal was struck to restore the Bourbon monarchy. Since the Bourbon pretender was childless he would be succeeded by a member of the Orleanist branch. The deal fell apart over the issue of the national flag as the Bourbons insisted on restoring the old Fleur de Lis rather than the revolutionary tricolor. This was too much for the moderate elements of the national assembly and France became a Republic by default which was not a good start .

Ferdinand De Lesseps, the builder of the Suez Canal, attempted to repeat this success by building another canal in Panama and solicited funds from the French middle class but unforeseen problems such as yellow fever in the Panama jungle caused the entire enterprise to crash in 1887, ruining thousands of small investors. The involvement of a few Jewish bankers revived the idea of a vast world-wide Jewish Syndicate out to control the world and the revelation that bribes had been paid to over 100 deputies discredited the Republic. This fanned the flames of anti-Semitism and were stoked by several vicious newspapers such as La Libre Parole whose editor Edouard Drumont was a major player in the Affair. The Depression of the 1870's ended a long period of economic growth and looking for scapegoats, many people blamed the Jews. This set the stage for Dreyfus in 1894.

Let's briefly review the cast of characters

Alfred Dreyfus was born in 1859, the son of a prosperous Jewish family from Alsace, one of the provinces ceded to Germany after the 1870-1871 war. Dreyfus joined the Army and performed brilliantly at the French War College, earning a place on the General Staff; the only Jew in such a prestigious position. He was deeply resented as both a Jew and an Alsatian, all of whom were considered suspect with German sympathies.

Major Walstin Esterhazy was a man of dubious moral values who constantly spent more than he earned and used every avenue to raise cash to finance his extravagant lifestyle. It is now almost universally accepted that he was the real traitor in the Affair and despite significant evidence against him was never convicted.

Colonel George Picquart along with Emile Zola were the true heroes of the Affair . Even though he was a convinced anti-Semite, a condition normal for his class, a Catholic aristocrat, after reviewing the bordereau (I'll explain that phrase later) he was convinced of Dreyfus innocence and despite threats from higher ups he continued to agitate for a reopening of the case until he was transferred overseas to get him out of the way.

Colonel Hubert Henry, of the counter intelligence branch, fabricated most of the so-called "evidence" in the bordereau, attempting to salvage the honor of the Army. After being interrogated in 1899, Henry committed suicide.

Emile Zola took up the Dreyfus cause in 1898 when he published a savage attack on the government's case, accusing them of railroading Dreyfus because he was a Jew. The title of Zola's attack (J'Accuse) has become a metaphor for any highly principled attack on established authority.

The Affair had many twists and turns with the involvement of numerous individuals and I can only skim the surface so try to follow the chain of events which I will explain as clearly as possible but am forced leave out quite a bit.

A cleaning lady in the German Embassy, secretly in the pay of French intelligence, discovered papers in a wastebasket revealing secrets that could only have come from someone at the French General Staff. These papers known as the bordereau were given to the Minister of War who ordered an immediate investigation. Suspicion centered on Dreyfus as he was not a popular officer and a Jew plus an Alsatian. Handwriting analysis was very inconclusive but a perpetrator had to be found so Dreyfus was arrested and imprisoned without being told of the exact charges or being shown the evidence against him. The court martial board struggled with the paucity of evidence but at the last moment of their deliberations they were given a secret packet from the Minister of War containing forged evidence and a reminder that a conviction was expected. Partly out of fear for their careers, the board voted unanimously to convict.

At this point Theodore Herzl, a secularized Austrian Jew working for a Vienna newspaper covering the Affair was shocked at the reaction of the French crowds who shouted "Death to the Jews" and other anti-Semitic slogans. Here is a quote from the official Jesuit publication *La Cicilia Cattallica* from a few years later which served to inflame Catholic opinion against the Jews. "The Jews have invented the allegations of a judicial error. The plot was worked out at the Zionist Congress in Basel, invoked ostensibly to discuss the deliverance of Jerusalem. The Protestants made common cause with the Jews for the creation of a Syndicate. The Jews allege a judicial error. The real error was that of the Assembly in 1789 which granted them French citizenship. That law should be repealed" In fact the Jesuits instituted a religious test in 1608 which required all members to prove at least five generations of Christian identity and this was not repealed until 1946. It's quite possible that this regulation was not rigorously enforced for many years prior to being repealed but the fact remains that it was official Jesuit policy until that time. It is also obvious why it was repealed in 1946, after the Second World War, because many Jewish children were hidden by French Catholic families and when their parents perished in the death camps they were raised as Catholics. One such Jewish child, Jean-Marie Lusiger, went on to become the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris from 1981 to 2005.

All of this convinced Herzl that it was impossible for Jews to properly assimilate into Western society and that only the establishment of a Jewish homeland would create true security for them. He wrote an influential book entitled *The Jewish State* and organized the first Zionist Congress in 1897. Even though Hertzl died in 1904 the Zionist movement he founded continued to meet regularly for the next 50 years and the movement culminated in the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

On January 5th, 1895 Dreyfus was publically degraded with the epaulets torn from his shoulder and his sword broken over the knee of the officer in charge. This was a terrible humiliation for a man who had devoted most of his adult life to service of the Republic. When leaving the scene of the events, Dreyfus loudly proclaimed his innocence which onlookers took as either a deeply humiliating act or evidence that he was really innocent. In February he began his long journey to Devil's Island, off the coast of South America. The horror of this place was demonstrated in a 1970's movie entitled *Papillion* starring Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman.

In July 1896 the chief of counter intelligence died and the post was given to Major (later Colonel) George Picquart. He was a loyal officer but shared the views of the majority of Army officers against Jews and was predisposed to believe Dreyfus guilty. Picquart reopened the investigation and was struck by the inconsistency of the evidence against Dreyfus. Later in 1896 he received the infamous *petit bleu* which was another handwritten note discovered by the same cleaning lady. Picquart was astonished at the similarity of the handwriting to that of Major Walstin Esterhazy, a shady character chronically strapped for the funds needed to finance his lavish and hedonistic lifestyle. When he brought this evidence to the attention of his superiors he was ordered to keep quiet and eventually reassigned to Tunisia in order to get him out of the way. However

he copied the incriminating evidence and gave instructions for it to be released to the public if anything happened to him.

The cover-up continued as the incriminating evidence found its way to the National Assembly and eventually the press. Dreyfus wife Lucie and brother Mathieu were in the forefront of the fight to clear his name and were denounced by the other side which took the label of anti-Dreyfusards ; a counter to supporters known as Dreyfusards. Esterhazy was eventually brought before a court martial but quickly acquitted of all wrong doing which infuriated the Dreyfusards even more. Even more astonishing, the military court refused to connect the cases of Dreyfus and Esterhazy. In other words even if Esterhazy had been found guilty, this would not have exonerated Dreyfus.

Finally in January 1898, Emile Zola, a prominent French novelist published his savage attack on the anti-Dreyfusards known as J'Accuse. This is one of the first instances of an individual using the mass media to influence public opinion. In June of 1898 the Minister of War Godfrey Cavaignac presented the doctored evidence to the National Assembly (which had never before been made public) and they voted overwhelmingly to reaffirm their support for the initial verdict.

A piece of evidence was found to have been forged by Colonel Hubert George who after interrogation committed suicide; a razor had been conveniently left in his cell. Agitation for a Dreyfus retrial grew along with a mini civil war in French Society. The anti-Dreyfusards were obsessed with the honor of the Army, the shield of the nation against the hereditary enemy, Germany. Whatever had to be done to protect this honor, including imprisoning an innocent man was justified. The Dreyfusards were pilloried as anarchists, Freemasons and sexual deviates.

After much agitation, the National Assembly passed a bill to set up a special commission to investigate the case and recommend a course of action, including the possibly of a new trial. The anti-Dreyfusards, with the Church in the forefront, bitterly protested this action. The President of the Republic, Felix Faure, who was sympathetic to the Anti-Dreyfusards died suddenly of natural causes and was succeeded by Emile Loubert, who was more sympathetic to the Dreyfusards. Loubert was later attacked by a right wing fanatic at a racetrack but survived relatively unscathed.

In June 1899 the special court annulled the 1894 verdict and called for a new trial to be held at Rennes. A few days later, his health broken from the brutal conditions he has experienced, Dreyfus sailed from Devils Island and returned to France. A new trial was held at Rennes and Dreyfus was convicted again on a split vote but with "extenuating circumstances"; a preposterous result since there can't possibly be extenuating circumstances regarding treason. This verdict elicited a storm of protest from all over the world, especially the United States, but the leading French Catholic newspaper had the following comment. " Justice has been done. Dreyfus has been condemned and as Frenchmen we rejoice over it. As Catholics we praise God for it". After the trial, Dreyfus was pardoned by the President of the Republic but his conviction was not voided.

I don't want to beat up on the Church but the following personal story will indicate how very different conclusions can be reached about the same incident based on personal perspective and inclination. I went to Catholic School for 16 years and in high school we were taught by an order called the Christian Brothers who had been founded in Ireland in the early 19th century but spread, especially to France, later in the century. In the early 1960's I recall an elderly brother telling us a story about another brother he had encountered many years before telling him about his early life. This brother was elderly at that time, which was 30-40 years before I heard the story, and the tale goes all the way back to 1906. We were told that in 1906 the Masons, in my day (the pre-Vatican II church) considered a graver threat to Catholicism than even the Communists, had taken over the French government and begun a systematic persecution of the Church which included the banishment of the Christian Brothers, including this one individual, who then came to the United States. This was presented to us as another example of the influence of the Holy Spirit who despite this temporary setback guided the Church to emerge stronger than ever. It wasn't until many years later than I discovered the true story which is that the Dreyfusards, who included many elements of French society besides the Masons and including millions of Catholics, had won the election and then moved to curb the excessive influence of the Church, not quite the same as persecution. This influence included an almost total Church control of public education.

In April 1900 the Great Exposition (a type of World's Fair) the largest of its kind before or since opened in Paris. The threat of Exposition boycotts by other countries was a significant motivating factor in the pardoning of Dreyfus. Emile Zola died mysteriously in September of 1902; the verdict was poor ventilation from the chimney which caused noxious fumes to enter his home. It is rumored that a local chimneysweep who was an ardent anti-Dreyfusard was working on the house next door and deliberately sabotaged Zola's chimney. Jean Jaures, the leader of the Socialists, delivered a moving address to the National Assembly in 1903 and demanded a revision of the Rennes verdict. In 1904 France, known as the eldest daughter of the Church for her long association with Catholicism, broke diplomatic ties with the Vatican and in 1905 a full separation of Church and State was proclaimed. Then in 1906 the Dreyfusards won a landslide victory in national elections and the Rennes verdict was annulled; Dreyfus was reinstated with the rank of major and Picquart who had been forced from the Army several years before was reinstated as a brigadier general. Both of them went on to serve bravely in World War One.

Even with the events of 1906, the controversy did not die. In 1908 the ashes of Zola were transferred to the Pantheon, the final resting place of great French citizens and during the ceremony Dreyfus was shot but not killed by an anti-Dreyfusard zealot. After the First World War, Dreyfus lived a quiet life until his death in 1935. Anti-Semitic feelings ran rampant after the Great Depression of the late 1920's and the rise of fascism and Nazism which had wide support in France. In 1936 a Popular Front of all left wing parties, including the Socialists and Communists, was formed to fight the rising tide of Fascism and they won the national elections. On the right the cry was raised "Better Hitler than Leon Blum", the leader of the Popular Front who just happened to be a Jew. After France was defeated by Germany in 1940 a government was formed in Vichy which collaborated

with the Germans and was involved in the deportation and elimination of most of the remaining French Jews and others who fled to France earlier in the war. Although clearly few of the principals from the Affair were still around in 1940, many Vichy supporters represented their political heirs and Vichy is often called the final revenge of the anti-Dreyfusards.

The legacy of the Affair lives on even today as the recent controversy about the wearing of the Muslim burqua in France is a direct result of the strict separation of Church and State decreed in 1905. Devout Christians are also banned from wearing crucifixes or other religious symbols when attending French public schools

The chronic instability of French governments from 1871 all the way until Charles de Gaulle formed the Fifth Republic in 1962 was directly related to the tensions and fissures in French Society begun by the revolution of 1789 and exacerbated by the Affair. Even today you have the French National Front, a far-right crypto-Fascist political party which is deeply anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic. They habitually draw 10-15 percent of the vote in national and Presidential elections and their former leader, Jean Marie Le Pen, actually made it to a presidential run-off in 2002 where he was eventually crushed by the winner, Jacques Chirac. This run-off, despite Le Pen's eventual loss, represented a serious embarrassment for the French political system.

There is an alternative theory about the Affair which is advanced primarily by Robert Kaplan, a journalist and prominent author. Mr. Kaplan contends that the bordereau was planted by the French high command using Esterhazy as an unwilling dupe. It was never intended to be discovered in the waste basket and the purpose was to give the Germans false information about the capabilities of French artillery. The French 75 mm gun was one of the decisive weapons early in the war and along with the grit and determination of the average French soldier did more than anything else to win the decisive Battle of the Marne in 1914. Harry Truman, an artillery captain in WWI and later President of the United States, had 75's in his artillery battery as they were the best guns available. The bordereau listed another artillery piece, the 120 mm, which had a rate of fire similar to the most advanced German weapon, whereas the 75's rate of fire was almost three times as high. If the Army would have disclosed this deception which would then have revealed the truth about the 75mm gun, it would have been a tremendous blow to national security and the fate of one man was far less important than preserving the 75 as a "secret weapon". This theory is not widely shared by professional historians but interesting nonetheless.

Although it is dangerous to draw too many parallels there are some similarities between the Affair and recent developments in US history. The anti-Dreyfusards wanted to preserve the honor of the Army above all else and felt that national security, in this case the reputation of the Army as the shield of France even disregarding the paragraph above, was far more important than the guilt or innocence of one man. Similarly the US government in fighting the so-called "War on Terror" often feels justified in suspending basic legal protections in order to serve the greater good of protecting the nation against another 09-11 attack, or something even worse.