

Bjarki, 24 December 1897¹

[English translation by Professor Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, University of Iceland, 2009]

Foreign affairs

There are two issues which are discussed most widely in the entire educated part of the world these days.

One takes place in France, the so-called Dreyfus affair, and the other is the argument between the German and Slavic parties in Austria.

There is so much written and telegraphed about the **Dreyfus** and his case in the foreign press, which came to Iceland with the ship Vaagen, that it would take a year's worth of our newspaper to relay all the information, therefore we cannot go into the details of the story. It is worth our attention, however, because although it is neither particularly out-of-the ordinary nor particularly important, it provides a clear idea about the moral foundations of the civilized Christian nations.

It is well known that all of the major powers, and also the smaller ones as far as they can, employ an army of spies or, more correctly, of thieves and traitors, in the rest of the world. The purpose of these people is to steal, trick or buy secret military and strategic information, or anything they find interesting to know, from the officials of neighboring or opposing nations. All nations take part in these kinds of schemes. Each nation calls its own gangsters patriots and pays them well, while during times of war they hang or decapitate the other nations' 'patriots', while during times of peace, they usually are imprisoned for life.

France and Germany have in recent years been at odds with each other over these spy networks. The French and Germans have quite often bribed each others' officials to steal documents from the other government or steal their secrets, or they have sent infiltrators into each other's ranks, some of them quite skilled and savvy. Sometimes a young and beautiful lady has been sent over the border to seduce an important person of the other nation, and then trick him into revealing classified information and to steal from him like a crow. When the lady is caught in her mischief she receives little more punishment than a free trip to her home nation, while the males in her line of work get a bit more of a beating.

It has been mentioned in the Icelandic press in 1894 that the French government had acquired a letter, which clearly showed that German spies had infiltrated the leadership of the French armed forces, and even the highest ranks. The writing of the letter appeared to be that of Captain Dreyfus. He was formally accused of the crime but he steadfastly denied any wrongdoing. The case was prosecuted with determination and finally Dreyfus was sentenced by a military court to life imprisonment. The

¹ *Bjarki* was a weekly provincial newspaper published in the small town of Seyðisfjörður on Iceland's east coast. It was edited by the well-known poet, Þorsteinn Erlingsson, who was one of the earliest proponents of moderate socialism in Iceland, and the article is most likely written by him.

government had him moved to the Devil's Island, a small barren rock by the north-eastern coast of South America. In that sad place nothing grows because of the blazing sun, and there the prisoner sits, degraded and apathetic in a small hut surrounded by tall iron fences cordoning off the sun-baked rock, with 11 guards nearby who are forbidden to speak with him, and the prisoner has absolutely nothing to do. There he has become grey-haired and old in a matter of three years, and last we heard he was dying.

But now the story turns to Paris.

In the middle of last November the vice-president of the upper house of the French parliament, Scheurer-Kestner, wrote a letter to the minister of military affairs and told him that he had unequivocal evidence proving that Dreyfus was innocent and there were no grounds for his sentencing. He claimed to be able to prove that the letter used to prosecute Dreyfus was not in fact written by his hand. In fact it was written by another high-ranking military official.

Now, people were up in arms in France; the newspapers chose sides either siding with or against Dreyfus, arguing their case with passion and anarchy. Some of them angrily disparaged Dreyfus and claimed that Scheurer had been bribed by the Germans, and they tried to work up nationalist hatred against Dreyfus. They attempted to convince the government to send executioners to the Devil's Island in order to remove what little life was left in the prisoner so that he could never be freed. The majority of the press belonged to this group.

There were, however, many liberal and able people who thanked Scheurer and tried to bring the public to its senses, with little success. The hatred of the Germans was so entrenched that there was little room for reason, humanity or justice. The Minister of Military Affairs, Billot, and the entire ministry were against starting a new investigation and claimed that Dreyfus's sentence in military court was completely legal and just.

But at this time Dreyfus's brother wrote another letter to Minister Billot, claiming that Dreyfus is innocent and the true culprit is the count Esterhazy, who holds the position of Major in the military.

Count Esterhazy rushed to all the papers with strong protests against the accusations against him and claimed to be ready to prove his innocence, but many indications pointed to his guilt. He has spent vast amounts of money recently and cannot explain from where he has received it. Also one of the French newspapers has letters written by him that attacks blasts the French army. The letters were bought from one of the count's mistresses and at first he denied having written them, but later had to recant his denial. In the letter which was used to sentence Dreyfus, it says in the conclusions: "Now I am leaving for the military exercise". It has been proven that Dreyfus did not take part in any military exercises at the time, but Esterhazy did, upon his own request. One Parisian newspaper also claims that the president at the time, Casimir Perier, had received a letter the evening before Dreyfus was sentenced, from the German Emperor, Wilhelm, where he proclaimed that Dreyfus had not betrayed his country or sold any secrets to the Germans, putting his word and crown on the line to back up that claim. The German newspapers deny this, however, and now it is stated that the Emperor refuses to testify in the case. The head prison guard of the military prison has also written a lengthy letter to the newspapers stating that he is fully convinced of Dreyfus's innocence. And it appears that the military was so adamant that Dreyfus was guilty in 1894 that they sent one of their officers, by the name of Picquart, off to duty to Tunisia because he was convinced of Dreyfus's innocence and said he was ready

to prove it. Now he has been called back home, but it appears that the government has only done this after giving in to public pressure.

The most recent newspapers claim that General Pellieux has searched Picquart's living quarters and seized a letter from Picquart before he returned home and that he intends to put an end to the investigation and to silence the case. The people and the parliament have, however, stood up in protest against this and demanded that the Minister of Justice would resign and it is believed that the entire government will fall if the investigation is not promptly continued.

Paris is in up in arms over this case and it is said that something like this has not been seen since the days of the old Panama Affair. People furiously argue about the affair and editors of the papers even challenge each other to duels. Entire stories are fabricated in the mornings, only to be recanted in the evenings, and all of this information is then sent by telegraphs or express mail day-in and day-out throughout the civilized world.

The majority believes Dreyfus to be innocent, but the whole investigation is kept secret so nothing is certain yet. It is likely that the investigation is over now, but unfortunately we, as the poor others who do not have access to a telegraph, will have to wait until the ships arrive with the latest news on this incident and we ask our good readers to wait until then.