

The Dreyfus Affair and the Shock of Anti-Semitism
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Recorded April 4, 2008, for the Lorraine Beitler Collection of the Dreyfus Affair,
University of Pennsylvania Libraries

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1. Will They Go That Far...?

There is a quip told by historians that offers a somewhat unsettling entry into the Dreyfus Affair. It goes as follows: if in the year 1925, the claim had been made that within 20 years close to six million Jews would be slaughtered in Europe, the most plausible reaction, after initial gasps of disbelief, might well have been to say, “Ah the French. Will they actually go that far?”

Now, the serious point behind that somewhat sinister joke is that the Dreyfus Affair, which saw violent anti-Semitic demonstrations in every major French city in 1898, which saw a stylish criminal named Jules Guérin, who was the head of an organization called the Anti-Semitic League, saw him attempt a coup d'état against the Third Republic—the Dreyfus Affair, as the philosopher Hanna Arendt put it, can be regarded as a huge dress rehearsal for the Nazi genocide of the Jews. It was the first use of anti-Semitism as a tool for mass political mobilization and was, moreover, in some ways a turning point in European history. For one thing, it gave us the term “intellectual,” which was first used as an insult against the supporters of Dreyfus and then taken up as a badge of identity and a source of pride by Dreyfus’s partisans. And then there is the fact that Theodore Herzl was converted, or so he said, to the cause of political Zionism by the events of the Dreyfus Affair. So, put it together and you have a dress rehearsal for Nazism, birthplace of political Zionism, and origin of the European intellectual—the Affair was, I suppose, a kind of nodal point in the dreamscape of European history. The enduring shock-value of the Affair was nicely captured by the writer Mavis Gallant a few years ago. She had been living in France for a number of years, she observed, but when she first read the history, or a history, of the Dreyfus Affair her perception of where she was living changed totally. It was, she said, as though she had been up until then watching television with the sound turned off, and what she heard, we may assume, were those cries of “Death to the Jews!” during the notorious riots of 1898.

The Dreyfus Affair, it’s been said, was a near civil war—one, moreover, that periodically flared up through the period of the German occupation in World War II. But at its center was a flawed legal procedure. A few words then about the shape of the Dreyfus case that detonated the near civil war called the “Dreyfus Affair.”

2. The Affair

In October 1894, the French army, under pressure to identify the author of a memorandum, known as the *bordereau*, offering military secrets to the German military attaché in Paris, the French army arrested Captain Alfred Dreyfus, an Alsatian Jew, for whom the High Command had, it should be said, little affection. Now the choice of a Jew, we should note, was in part in response to a press campaign by Edouard Drumont, a man whose book called *La France Juive*, *Jewish France*, presented left-wing, that is anti-capitalist, anti-Semitism, as *the* political philosophy for the twentieth century that was about to begin. The book, a thousand pages in length, published in 1886, turned out to be one of the two best-selling works of the entire second half of the nineteenth century in France. And this is an important point. Most of us tend to think of anti-Semitism as a dirty little secret that one or many people share, but for Drumont, as his disciple the distinguished novelist Bernanos would say as late as 1931, for Drumont anti-Semitism was, I quote Bernanos, “a major political concept.” Well, the army, eager to make its accusation stick, exploited the secrecy of a court marshal to fudge the evidence in a trial that led Dreyfus to be convicted of high treason and sentenced, as most people know, to lifelong detention on Devil’s Island.

Eventually, a series of coincidences revealed first to Lieutenant Colonel Picquart, who was soon to take on the role of whistle-blower in the Affair, then to Dreyfus’s brother, Mathieu, a very loyal brother, it was revealed to them that the author of the memorandum, or the *bordereau*, was in fact the flamboyant commandant Esterhazy, a true scoundrel, Esterhazy. I brought with me today a letter that the American philosopher William James wrote about the Dreyfus Affair in which he says that, I’ll quote him, “Esterhazy seems to me a fantastic scoundrel, knowing all the secrets, saying what he pleases, mystifying all Europe, leading the whole French army by the nose, a regular Shakespearean type of villain with an insane exuberance of rhetoric and fantasy about his vanities and hatreds that literature has never yet equaled.” There is Esterhazy, the true villain of the Affair, and he turns out to be revealed by Picquart and eventually by Mathieu, to be that villain.

But by the time Esterhazy had been revealed, at least to those who were in a position to know that he was the villain, any demonstration, any public demonstration, of Esterhazy’s guilt would have revealed the irregularity of the original proceedings. Whereupon the army General Staff closed ranks to exonerate and conspire with the actual traitor, doing its best to discount the revelation that a crucial incriminating document against Dreyfus had in fact been forged by order of one Colonel Henry, who, by the way, confessed and promptly committed suicide. As the facts of the case leaked out, the self-designated “intellectuals,” Dreyfus’s supporters, found themselves arguing the cause of truth and human rights against a French establishment whose position was that the rights of no individual should be allowed to undermine the morale of the French army during a crisis of national security. Henry’s forgery was even dubbed “heroic” in the nationalist press. It was Charles Maurras, who became a very influential figure in right-wing French thought, whose career was virtually launched by that astounding claim that the forgery of Henry was heroic. Just think of what the argument must have sounded like. It is one thing to risk your life to defend the honor of the French army. It is another thing to risk more than one’s life, to risk one’s honor, by committing a crime, namely forgery, in order to protect the French army.

3. Rennes

Eventually, the case was retried in the provincial city of Rennes in 1899. Dreyfus, who had been kept in solitary confinement for more than four years on Devil's Island, who knew virtually nothing about the Affair that bore his name, who was wracked with malaria, with dysentery, God knows with what else, and who out of pride had propped up his stature during his court appearances with unconvincing shoulder pads—Dreyfus proved an altogether unimpressive witness and was again found guilty, albeit with extenuating circumstances. I suppose that the extenuating circumstances were that he was in fact innocent. The pathos of his plight was that throughout his ordeal he retained his love of France—the country, it should not be forgotten, that under Napoleon had emancipated the Jews of Europe even as he, Dreyfus, had retained his love of the army—that is, his confidence in the very people who were building the fraudulent case against him.

Perhaps I can add or improvise a personal note here. A few weeks ago, I guess it was in the month of February (we're in 2008 now), I was lucky enough to have dinner with the grandson, not the great-grandson, but the grandson, of Captain Dreyfus, who is Charles Dreyfus, who is eighty-one years old and who knew his grandfather for eight years. Dreyfus didn't die, of course, until 1935, and he mentioned what was for him the most poignant moment of the Affair. And it was this: before Dreyfus went off to Devil's Island, he had a meeting with the chief of the General Staff, whose name was General Boisdeffre. They had a good conversation: Dreyfus explained that he was innocent; the General, Boisdeffre, said he understood, that he would do whatever he could to make things good for Dreyfus. Dreyfus then went off with total confidence, he went off to Devil's Island with total confidence in the good will of General Boisdeffre, and it was not until he came back for the second trial that, in the middle of the trial, Boisdeffre took the stand and testified against Dreyfus, at which point Dreyfus realized that Boisdeffre, in whom he had total trust, was not an honorable man who had failed to reverse or to correct a horrendous judicial error—namely, the conviction against him—but that, in fact, he was one of the principal architects in the conspiracy against him.

4. Rehabilitation

Back now to the events of the Affair. On the morrow of the Rennes verdict, Dreyfus was pardoned by the President of the Republic, in part, no doubt, because the world at large had by then turned Dreyfusard. The cause of Dreyfus was always a minority cause in France, though it was a majority cause outside of France, and indeed, you know, one could say that the Dreyfus Affair was one of the first and major instances of international French-bashing in the world at large. In any event, he was pardoned by the French president about a week after, or ten days after he was found guilty with extenuating circumstances, and one of the reasons, of course, was that keeping Dreyfus in prison at that point might well have provoked an international boycott of the Paris World Exposition of 1900, which would have been a public relations catastrophe for France. To benefit from the pardon, that is, to emerge from his juridical nightmare, however—and this was the final irony—Dreyfus would have had first to accept his guilt, which to the chagrin of his supporters, he did. After all, after all those years on Devil's Island, remember that Dreyfus was a rich man, he came from a rich family, which was, by the way, one reason why the left wing in France was originally against Dreyfus, or at least indifferent to Dreyfus. Their claim was that the Dreyfus Affair was an internal matter of the bourgeoisie, and we on the left couldn't give a damn; as one important figure said, "we all know Dreyfus is paying for somebody else,

but just who, how many thousands, in how many sweatshops are paying for Dreyfus? That's a different question." Eventually, the Left switched under the leadership of people like Jean Jaurès.

Well, anyway, here was Dreyfus who accepted the pardon, who, days after emerging from captivity could be seen on the *boulevards*, no doubt dining in the best restaurants in Paris, and the verdict on Dreyfus, who by then had become a little bit the anti-hero of the Affair, was severe. I think it was Anatole France, the Dreyfusard writer who said, "we would have given our lives for Dreyfus, but Dreyfus himself opted not to." Of course, had Dreyfus given his life there would no longer have been a Dreyfus Affair.

Finally, in 1906, Dreyfus was officially rehabilitated. He was inducted into the Legion of Honor in the very courtyard in which he had been demoted, degraded, stripped of his [insignia] eleven years earlier.

5. Aftermath

As for Esterhazy, he died in exile in London in 1923, trying to turn his role in the Dreyfus Affair into a racket. I learned the other day that there has been an Israeli play produced recently with some success, whose subject is Esterhazy in London. It is called in Hebrew "Ani lo Dreyfus," "I am no Dreyfus." That Esterhazy.

By the way, on the story of Esterhazy, the Shakespearean scoundrel as William James called him, there is no end of interesting material. For instance, let me add this. If in the years before the Dreyfus Affair you were a Jewish officer in the army who had been insulted by a professional anti-Semite, say Drumont, in the press, the thing to do was to challenge your insulter to a duel. Ah, but that was difficult. You had to find someone to assist you to serve as your second in a duel—not so easy, preferably a non-Jew to vouch for your honor. Well, it turned out that there was a man who set up a concession; he could be hired out to serve as a second for Jewish officers whose honor had been doubted in the press, questioned in the press, attacked in the press. That guy, the man who had the concession to assist Jewish officers in defending their honor, was none other than Esterhazy, the future villain of the Affair. And, by the way, the man who would get you in touch with Esterhazy, if you were the Jewish officer—because how would you find him?—well, it was Zadoc Kahn, the Chief Rabbi of Paris, who said I can put you in touch with the man who will help you out in this embarrassing situation. So, just think that, as late as, shall we say, 1890 or so, if you were a Jewish officer whose honor had been attacked, the man who would help you defend your honor was Esterhazy, the future villain of the Affair.

So, as I say, he died in exile, Esterhazy, in 1923. Dreyfus, who had reenlisted in the army—which he had left because he was not being given credit for the years he served at Devil's Island, he was not credited with those years in his advance, in his seniority within the army, so he quit the army—but he reenlisted during World War I, and he fought at the battle of Verdun. He eventually died in 1935, which is why Charles Dreyfus, the grandson, could have known him for eight years. He, by the way, Dreyfus, had a granddaughter who died at Auschwitz. The continuity, you see, between the Dreyfus Affair and the Holocaust seems in many ways clear. One of the great readers, by the way, of Edouard Drumont, the man of *La Libre Parole* and *La France Juive*, one of the great readers was the Viennese anti-Semite Lueger, the man whom Hitler called "the last, true German to serve the public in Austria." So you go from Drumont to Lueger to Hitler, it's a rather clear genealogy. When Charles Maurras, the man whose career was launched by arguing that Henry's forgery was in fact heroic, when he was found guilty of

collaborating with the enemy in World War II, his comment showed an admirable sense of history; he said, “this is the revenge of Dreyfus.”

In 1985, Jacques Lang, the French Minister of Culture, commissioned a statue of Dreyfus, but the army managed to prevent its installation at its intended site, the courtyard of the École Militaire, the scene of Dreyfus’s ceremonial humiliation. Three years later, it was discreetly installed and unveiled at an unobtrusive spot on the Boulevard Raspail on Paris’s Left Bank, where you can see it today.

I came with one visual. Let this be an addendum to the presentation I just made. My colleague, Jean-Max Guieu, of Georgetown University, who joined me yesterday here at the University of Pennsylvania, arrived with a gift for me, a strange gift. You recall I mentioned Jules Guérin, the leader of the Anti-Semitic League and the man who attempted a coup d’état in 1899 against the French Republic; it was a failed coup d’état. Jules Guérin’s picture I bring with me right here. I called him a stylish criminal—he was a criminal type. You can see the stylish moustache of his. You could get a postcard with a portrait of the leader of the Anti-Semitic League to send back to your friends in the provinces. I don’t know what you could say. . . “Here I am enjoying the anti-Semitic atmosphere in Paris—wish you were here. I hear there’s going to be a riot tomorrow.” So just imagine what the atmosphere was like for the Jews of Paris in 1898-1899. Thanks.

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Ibels, “Gare la bombe!”, *Le Sifflet*, no. 33 (September 15, 1898)

Ibels, “Les responsables: Jules Guérin, Le doux géant,” *Le Sifflet*, no. 42 (November 18, 1898)

Adolph Willette, *Elections legislatives du septembre 1889*, poster (lithograph), 1889.

Le Pilon, no. 621 (March 13, 1898), detail

Theodor Herzl, from *Il Sionismo nel pensiero dei suoi capi* (Firenze: Casa Editrice Israel, 1925), Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Français! Le Juif! Voilà l’ennemi!, postcard (Lyon, n.d.)

Caran d’Ache, “Un diner en famille,” from *L’Album des lundis par Caran d’Ache*

Valle: *De quel côté penchera la balance?*, postcard (n.p., 1902)

Comparaison entre l’écriture du bordereau et l’écriture Esterhazy, [detail showing bordereau] (Paris: P.-V. Stock?, [1898?])

E. Claes, *Honneur au héros martyr, Le Capitaine Alfred Dreyfus*, lithograph (Brussels: Lith. Alfred Beauwin, n.d.)

Edouard Drumont, postcard (n.d.)

B. Moloch, *M. Edouard Drumont*, postcard (n.d.)

Edouard Drumont, *La France juive: essai d'histoire contemporaine* (Paris: Librairie Blériot, [188-?])

Musée des patriotes, no. 1, "Tirez laches!", postcard, verso: *Nos Bons Français: M. Ed. Drumont, Carte anti-Semite française* (1900)

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"Mathieu Dreyfus," *Le Petit Journal. Supplément illustré*, no. 380 (February 27, 1898), p. 69

Affaire Dreyfus: Esterhazy à Londres. Vente de revelations, postcard, *Affaire Dreyfus*, no. 10 (Venice: G. Sternfeld, [1898])

Ibels, "Esterhazy 1er ! Pourquoi pas ?," *Le Sifflet*, no. 1 (February 17, 1898)

Affaire Dreyfus: Esterhazy, postcard (Turin: Société ed. cartes illustrées, n.d.)

Affaire Dreyfus: Pas-à-quatre, postcard (Turin: Société ed. cartes illustrées, n.d.)

G. Julio?, *Au commandant Esterhazy, La France*, postcard (Brussels: J. Deurwaerder, ca. 1900)

"Lieutenant Colonel Henry," *The Sunday Inter Ocean*, Chicago, September 10, 1899, p. 1 [detail]

Orens, *Le Calvaire Dreyfus: Suicide du Brave Colonel Henry*, postcard (n.p., 1904)

G.T., [La République guidée par l'armée et le cléricalisme], *Affaire Dreyfus*, no. 1, postcard (Venice: G. Sternfeld, 1898)

Postcards from the series *Procès de Rennes* (Rennes: Warnet-Lefèvre, 1899)

Gruss von der Teufelsinsel, postcard (Leipzig: C. W. Löxe, 1899?)

"Dreyfus à l'île du Diable," *Le Petit Journal. Supplément illustré*, no. 306 (September 27, 1896)

"Le Procès de Rennes: Dreyfus devant le Conseil de guerre," *Le Petit Journal. Supplément illustré*, no. 457 (August 20, 1899)

Enzo, "Et maintenant, madame, parlez!" [The Rennes Verdict], postcard (Torino: Societa editrice cartoline, [after September, 1899?])

Alfred Dreyfus, photograph, detail from Louis Rogès, *L’Affaire Dreyfus: Cinq Semaines à Rennes: deux cents photographies de Gerschel* (Paris: F. Juven, 1899), title-page

“Le Général Le Mouton de Boisdeffre,” *Le Petit Journal. Supplément illustré*, no. 151 (October 14, 1893)

“Vive l’Armée,” *Le Petit Journal. Supplément illustré*, no. 376 (January 30, 1898)

“Affaire Dreyfus (Parquet du Conseil de Guerre),” *Le Petit Journal. Supplément illustré*, no. 372 (2 janvier 1898)

“Procès de Rennes: Général de Boisdeffre, Commandant Carrière, M. Cavaignac et Général Roget,” postcard (1899)

“Le Capitaine Dreyfus devant le Conseil de Guerre,” *Le Petit Journal. Supplément illustré*, no. 214 (December 23, 1894)

“History of the Dreyfus Case,” *The Sunday Inter Ocean*, Chicago, September 10, 1899

Alfred Dreyfus. La vérité est en marche. Die Wahrheit bricht sich endlich Bahn, postcard ([Berlin], n.d.)

Triumph des Gerechtigkeit, postcard ([Germany], n.d.)

Dreyfus: A Full Story of the Most Remarkable Military Trial and Scandal of the Age, postcard (Cleveland: N.G. Hamilton Pub. Co., n.d.)

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Louis Rogès, *L’Affaire Dreyfus: Cinq semaines à Rennes: deux cents photographies de Gerschel* (Paris: F. Juven, 1899), frontispiece

G. Lion?, *Jaurès*, postcard (n.d.)

Anatole France, postcard (Paris, n.d.)

E. Le Deley, *La Réhabilitation de Dreyfus*, postcard series (Paris, 1906)

Croix de la Légion d’honneur

Ibels, “Une Bonne Journée,” *Le Sifflet*, no. 35 (September 29, 1898)

“Le Duel Henry-Picquart,” *Le Petit Journal, supplément illustré*, no. 383 (March 20, 1898)

“Dreyfus’ Exile Ended by Death,” *The Citizen-Advertiser*, Auburn, N.Y., July 13, 1935

“A propos du Judas Dreyfus,” *La Libre parole illustrée*, no. 70 (November 10, 1894)

Karl Lueger, photograph (not in collection)

Adolf Hitler, photograph (not in collection)

Monument to Alfred Dreyfus, Paris (not in collection)

L’Antijuif, January 29, 1899