

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION
HISTORY OF THE JEWS III
LECTURE 23: THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

France's persistent, unresolved civil war between Left and Right, and its obsession with the increasing power of Germany, help to explain why the Dreyfus Affair, the trial and imprisonment of a Jewish captain in the French army for espionage, became the central event of the 1890s. But as a crucial episode in the history of European anti-Semitism, the Dreyfus Affair also reflects one of our central themes: the discontents of modernity. If liberalism was the ideology of modernization, anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century was often the anti-liberal ideology of those who felt uneasy about the impact of modernization on their societies and their own lives.

Europe's Jews seemed to be the principal beneficiaries of modernization: in three generations, many of them—and the Dreyfus family was a good example—had risen from poverty and peddling to the upper ranks of the bourgeoisie. How had they managed this rapid ascent? From the perspective of anti-Semitic demagogues, the answer was obvious: they must have cheated, thriving only by exploiting others. In France, an association between Jews and financial scandal preceded the Dreyfus case. From fraud to treason—in France, the ancient stereotype of the Jews as Judas, agent of corruption and betrayal, morphed into the image of the Jewish captain who had sold sensitive military secrets to the Germans.

1. WHY SPY?

There are three principal reasons why people commit treason by selling secrets to a foreign power: ideology, money, and sex. Often the second and third of these motives combine to produce a sordid mixture. The man who offered to sell secret technical information to the German military attaché in Paris in July 1894 was a perfect example of this classic pattern. Major Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy, the real traitor in the Dreyfus Affair, was a member of a French branch of a famously wealthy Austro-Hungarian aristocratic family, but he was a scoundrel, a man of many intrigues and mistresses, chronically in debt.

How did the affair begin, and what was its larger context? One of the responsibilities of French military intelligence was to track the activities of Maximilian von Schwartzkoppen, the German military attaché in Paris. The French Secret Service employed a charwoman in the embassy to collect the contents of the waste paper baskets there. In September 1894 careful sifting of this trash revealed an alarming document. This *bordereau*, as it came to be known in the case, included an offer to sell to the Germans an artillery manual and memoranda on the new short 120-millimeter cannon under development by the French. The gun was especially important to the French, who saw it as an equalizer on the battlefield if there should be another war with Germany. In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, the French had matched the Germans in rifle technology, but the Germans had the superior artillery. So the thought that someone had sold information about this new weapon aroused the deepest

anxieties among the French military intelligence officers who knew about the leak. The French were very much aware of the German threat, especially as Germany's population had by 1900 outstripped France's by a huge margin (65 million to 40 million).

But when French military intelligence looked for a traitor, they did not think of Esterhazy. He was not an artillery officer. They picked on Dreyfus because he was a specialist in that field, and he was the only Jewish officer attached to the General Staff, the elite officer corps of the French army. A handwriting expert offered his opinion that Dreyfus's penmanship matched that on the bordereau.

But Dreyfus was an extremely unlikely candidate for espionage and treason. He was member of the ancient Jewish community of the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine—a French super-patriot who had joined the army hoping to contribute to the recovery of those lost provinces. Moreover, Dreyfus was a wealthy man, happily married with two children. So none of the traditional motives for treason—ideology, money, sex—were present in his life. But once the army's senior officers had approved his arrest, they were unable or unwilling to correct their error. The right-wing newspapers, full of shameless anti-Semitic diatribes, would have attacked them mercilessly.

2. ANTISEMITISM IN FRANCE

There was an ugly streak of anti-Semitism in the French army, as there was in the wider society. The great bestseller of the 1880s—indeed one of the four or five best-selling books of the nineteenth century—had been a book entitled *La France juive* (1886) by Edouard Drumont (1844-1917). Combining crude anti-Semitic racism and paranoid conspiracy theories, Drumont vilified the "hooknosed tribe of foreigners" who, like microbes, had infected the body of the French nation.

How do we explain the rise of anti-Semitism in a country that had promulgated the Declaration of the Rights of Man and emancipated the Jews a century earlier? Anti-Semitism in France had originally been a left-wing phenomenon associated with the anti-capitalism of early socialists such as Fourier and Proudhon. But by the end of the century anti-Semitism had migrated to the reactionary right—people alarmed by the economic upheavals and social trends of modernity and eager to find a scapegoat for their troubles. The involvement of some French Jews in the financial scandals of the period gave Drumont his chance. His campaign blended vivid images of Christ-killers with the pseudo-science of racialism, pointing to the Jews not only as aliens but also as the principal source of the corruption that was so obviously ruining France.

The first of the great financial scandals was the crash of the Union Générale, a bank founded in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War by men with monarchist (anti-republican) views. They issued an appeal for support to French Catholics, and promised to break the alleged domination of French finance by Jews and Protestants. In 1878 they hired an ambitious entrepreneur named Eugène Bontoux (the model for the swindler protagonist of Émile Zola's novel *L'Argent*). Bontoux's signature project was a railroad in the Balkans, but he also invested widely elsewhere in eastern Europe and as far away as Brazil. Forging

an alliance with the papacy in Rome, he enticed scores of bishops, curates, and aristocrats to buy shares in the bank, repaying his shareholders' investments sixfold between 1878 and 1881. When Bontoux addressed his shareholders, he thanked divine providence for his bank's successful debut. When the bank crashed in 1882, Bontoux blamed not his own mismanagement, but a malevolent syndicate of rival bankers behind whom he detected the greedy machinations of the Rothschilds and their coreligionists, the Jews. Drumont echoed Bontoux's charges: "Today, the entire might of the State is placed at the service of the Jewish monopoly. The government, which supposedly represents everyone, uses the formidable resources conferred upon it by the collective citizenry to benefit a few at the expense of the many."

Another and larger financial crash—the Panama Scandal—soon followed, and this one, alas, really did involve Jewish financiers in prominent roles. Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal in the 1870s, had formed a company that promised to build another canal across the isthmus of Panama. But it would be much more difficult to dig a canal through the mountainous terrain and tropical rainforest of Panama than it had been to dig through the desert sands of Suez. The new project failed spectacularly, thousands of investors lost their shirts, and it soon became clear that a large number of French politicians had received bribes from the Panama Company. "There were enough sinners to keep magistrates well occupied for years. The sordid tale of Panama illustrated, if nothing else, the democracy of greed. But anti-republican newspapers intent on exploiting public rage wanted a satanic malefactor into whom all sinfulness could be cast, and three men prominently embroiled in the scandal justified their choice of the Jew" (Frederick Brown, *For the Soul of France: Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus*).

Drumont's newspaper declared Panama a "Jewish disaster." "It seems that all of Jewry, high and low, congregated beneath the udder of this milch cow. In the disaster that cost so many French their savings and so many good deputies their reputations, one encounters Jews wherever one turns. They were the authors of this foul mess. It was they who organized the siege of consciences, who finally strangled the enterprise. And while they divvy up the fruit of their rapine with impunity, the unfortunate administrators of the Society, Lesseps first of all, are being dragged before tribunals."

Again: "Those people [the Jews] have differently configured brains; their evolution has not been ours; and everything about them is exceptional and bizarre. They come from heaven knows where, they live wrapped in mystery.... They don't strive, they suddenly appear, dazzling European capitals with the millions they have acquired by unknown means. They don't die, they disappear as suddenly as they arrived, in a dramatic flurry. They stir everything up, they bring drama with them into the countries they unsettle and the interiors they invade. The Crash, the sensational event, the financial killing the unforeseen... are their natural element."

Alas, some of Drumont's most fervent supporters were Catholic priests. Here is an echo of Drumont from *La Semaine religieuse de Mende*, a diocesan newsletter from the Cévennes region: "We are being pillaged, dishonored, exploited, and

emptied by the Jew.... Servile, slithering, artful, filthy, and vile when he is the weaker one, he becomes arrogant when he has the upper hand, as he does now. The Jew is our master... When one of these vultures swoops down on the finances of a people, he pilfers, ransoms, tears, flays, strangles."

These are classic examples of *modern* anti-Semitism. If the Jews are no longer literally servants of the devil, as they were for anti-Semitic agitators during the Middle Ages, they are nevertheless the demonic agents of France's ruin. Benefiting from sinister financial conspiracies and frauds, earning windfall profits, they bring misery to gullible investors and ordinary hard-working French citizens. As we have seen in the case of the German version of anti-Semitism during the 1870s, the temptation to blame the discontents of capitalist modernization on a particular agent, the Jews, was irresistible. And if the Jews were guilty of every kind of fraud and financial manipulation, why not blame them for an even more heinous form of corruption: espionage, treason? The Dreyfus Affair would fuse anxieties about national security with resentments about modernization—a toxic combination of anxieties in France at the end of the nineteenth century.

3. THE LONG ORDEAL OF ALFRED DREYFUS

One of the astonishing features of the Dreyfus case is how long it took (twelve years!) to rectify the original "judicial error" of 1894. That is because the evidence against Dreyfus was so flimsy—a single document, in someone else's handwriting—that senior French officers decided to augment it with forged documents, and then took extraordinary steps to cover up their crimes. The judges convicted Dreyfus on the basis of a "secret dossier" of doctored documents assembled by Major Joseph Henry—documents that Dreyfus and his lawyers could not examine or challenge. After the verdict, Dreyfus was publicly stripped of his rank in the main courtyard of the Ecole Militaire, as a crowd of thousands shouted "Death to the Jews!" Exiled to the penal colony on Devil's Island, a barren outcropping of volcanic rock off the coast of South America, Dreyfus endured years of isolation, mistreatment, and disease. The officers who had framed him hoped that he would die there.

The first break in the case came when a French newspaper managed to obtain and publish a photograph of the bordereau. Mathieu Dreyfus, Alfred's brother, put the bordereau side by side with a sample of Alfred's handwriting on posters, demonstrating the lack of correspondence. And soon one of Esterhazy's creditors identified the real author of the bordereau from the published version. Almost simultaneously, the new director of intelligence, Colonel Georges Picquart, examined the secret dossier and saw immediately that the "evidence" was either flimsy or phony. Moreover, Picquart obtained a new document (the "*petit-bleu*") from the waste paper basket at the German embassy, and this one had Esterhazy's name on it. So at this point, at the end of 1896, the case should have ended with the exposure of the real traitor.

But it did not. The generals refused to re-open the case. "What do you care that that Jew is on Devil's Island?" one of them asked Picquart after a heated discussion. "His possible innocence is irrelevant. Such matters ought not enter

into consideration." In other words, the reputation of the French army was far more important than the fate of a single unfortunate Jewish officer. "What you've said is abominable," Picquart replied. "I do not know what I will do. But in any case I will not take this secret to the grave with me."

Picquart soon found himself transferred to a dangerous frontier post in Tunisia, but he had taken the precaution of leaving an account of all he had learned about the case with his lawyer in Paris. Undoubtedly he suspected his superiors of trying to arrange an early grave for him. In any case, it soon became clear that they would try to discredit him, even incriminate him. Rather than admit their own error, or arrest the real traitor, the generals and Major Henry decided to cope with the new evidence with more lies and forgeries. The new story was that Dreyfus's supporters, including Picquart, had conspired to direct suspicion against Esterhazy to exculpate Dreyfus! Henry forged more documents, while accusing Picquart of having forged the document (the "*petit-bleu*") that incriminated Esterhazy.

After another year of stonewalling and collusion by the generals, the great novelist Emile Zola entered the case with the most famous front-page headline in the history of journalism, "*J'accuse*," which appeared in the left-leaning newspaper *L'Aurore* on January 13, 1898. After a brilliant exposition of the conspiracy against Dreyfus (and Picquart), Zola concluded with a spectacular list of accusations that he knew would subject him to a libel trial:

I accuse Major Du Paty de Clam as the diabolic workman of the miscarriage of justice... and of then defending his dastardly deed, for three years, by the guiltiest and most absurd of machinations.

I accuse General Mercier of being an accomplice, if by weakness of spirit, in one of the greatest iniquities of the century.

I accuse General Billot of having held in his hands the unquestionable evidence of Dreyfus's innocence and of suppressing it, of having rendered himself guilty of this crime against humanity and justice for political reasons, to save the compromised general staff.

I accuse Generals de Boisdeffre and Gonse of having helped commit this same crime, the one out of Catholic fervor, no doubt, the other in a spirit of solidarity that portrays the war ministry as the unassailable holy of holies....

As for the people I accuse, I do not know them, I never saw them, I have against them neither resentment nor hatred. They are for me only entities, spirits of social evil. And the act I have accomplished here is only a revolutionary means for hastening the explosion of truth and justice.

Even Zola's fearless intervention could not turn the tide immediately. Convicted of libel, Zola left Paris for exile in London, where he died of carbon monoxide poisoning (from a blocked chimney) at the age of 62. Although it's impossible to

prove that his death was actually a murder rather than an accident, many historians today lean toward a murder verdict.

In the aftermath of Zola's sensational intervention in the Dreyfus Affair, there were riots verging on pogroms in many parts of the country: "Immediately following the publication of Emile Zola's *J'accuse*, there were anti-Jewish uprisings in virtually every city in France. Not only were Jewish stores and places attacked and burned but Jews were assaulted in the streets. The police seemed to be either ineffective or in league with the rioters.... According to police reports the crowds were not only crying slogans related to the Dreyfus Affair, but also "Death to the Jews!" In Paris the mob burst out of its traditional battleground in the Latin Quarter to attack Jewish stores on the Right Bank. In Nantes, it was reported a number of soldiers joined in the demonstration, and in Bordeaux pitched battles were fought in the vicinity of the synagogue. Significant outbreaks were reported in Marseille, Lyon, Nancy, and Versailles. Even smaller towns, Clermont-Ferrand, La Rochelle, Poitiers, Angoulême, and Saint Flour, had incidents of violence and anti-Semitic demonstrations. In Algeria, where for several days the police did nothing to prevent the clashes, the riots were particularly bloody; several people were beaten to death in what could only be described as a pogrom" (Michael Maurrus).

As for Drumont, he was unrepentant in his anti-Semitism. In 1898, the year of Zola's *J'accuse*, Drumont wrote yet another attack on the Jews, rehearsing all the familiar themes of his work: "If the circumstances were such that I was invested with an authority that would permit me to save my country I would turn the big Jews and their accomplices over to a court martial that would have them executed.... The Jews formerly had a nationality. They lost it because of their divisions and their absolute lack of any instinct of hierarchy and order. Thanks to their genius as conspirators and traffickers they reconstituted a money power that is formidable, not only though the force that money itself possesses, but because the Jews have diminished or destroyed the other powers so that only theirs remain, because they have modeled, fashioned, molded a society where money is the true master of all."

And Drumont was far from alone in his insistence on Dreyfus's guilt, and that of the Jews more generally, even after Zola's dramatic intervention. During Zola's libel trial, *Civiltà cattolica*, a newspaper affiliated with the Vatican in Rome, offered this bone-chilling example of anti-Semitism: "the Jewish race, the deicide people, wandering throughout the world, brings with it everywhere the pestiferous breath of treason. And so too in the Dreyfus case... it is hardly surprising if we again find the Jew in the front ranks, of if we find that the betrayal of one's country has been Jewishly conspired and Jewishly executed."

4. THEY DREYFUS AFFAIR IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

There were still many more twists in the case: Henry's suicide in August 1898, the court-martial of Picquart for allegedly having forged the *petit-bleu*, a second court-martial for Dreyfus in August-September 1899 (guilty again, though with "extenuating circumstances"!), the intervention of the great French socialist leader Jean Jaurès, attempted assassinations of Dreyfus's lawyer and of Dreyfus himself,

the High Court's reversal of Dreyfus's conviction and his reinstatement in the army in 1906.

One of the great American historians of France, Robert Paxton, summarizes the fallout of the Dreyfus Affair as follows: "several dozen duels, hundreds of lawsuits whose hearings commonly degenerated into fist fights, at least one all-out brawl on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies, a wave of looting and smashing of Jewish shops, a new mass journalism of rare virulence, the descent of the 'intellectuals' (the word entered common usage at this point) into political controversy, a new breed of activist political 'leagues' that experimented with techniques of mass mobilization and political violence... The centralization of both intellectual and official life in one crowded capital city heightened intensity. The electricity of many layers of unresolved conflict was quickly plugged into the quarrel: the obsession of the 1890s with the loss of 'national energy'; fear of socialists, foreigners, and change; lack of national self-confidence after the defeat and insurrection of 1870-1871; the special position of the officer corps as outside and somehow above the regime; the illegitimacy of the Republic in the eyes of numerous Catholics and monarchists."

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the tide turned when the great Zola intervened and charged the army with forging evidence and framing Dreyfus. The leader of French socialism, Jean Jaurès, after some hesitation, weighed in on the side of Dreyfus and the Republic. Dreyfus was vindicated, the army embarrassed, the Right defeated. But a number of figures previously on the left migrated to the right in the wake of the Affair, including the political theorist Georges Sorel. The author of *Reflections on Violence* (1906) vehemently rejected the secular Republic and insisted on the role of myth and the benefits of polarization in politics. He inspired characters as diverse as Mussolini and Lenin with his rejection of the compromises of bourgeois parliamentary politics. His followers crossed radical nationalism with pseudo-socialism and the result was one of the fateful mutations of twentieth-century politics: fascism.

In the broadest perspective, the Dreyfus Affair was an anticipation of the horrors that would engulf France and Europe during the twentieth century. The vilification of the Jews that we find in late nineteenth-century France was a dress rehearsal for the anti-Semitism that would lead to the murders of tens of thousands of French Jews in the Holocaust. One of them, Madeleine Dreyfus, Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus's granddaughter, was a member of the French Resistance during the Second World War. Captured by the Gestapo, she died of typhus in Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1944.

