

The Dreyfus Affair: The Fight for Justice and the Republican Dream

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Alfred Dreyfus, a military officer charged with treason, suffered an incredible injustice that enthralled and intrigued the entire population of France. From the end of the French Revolution and the establishment of the French Republic in 1870 until the finale of the Dreyfus Affair in 1906, France remained a nation divided. Various political groups clashed throughout this time period, often in violent outbursts of rage targeted at the social injustices they believed existed in their new Republic. The Dreyfus Affair provided these different political groups a common vessel to have their voices heard. From socialist anarchists to Catholic monarchists, the writing and publishing of newspaper articles, posters, and pamphlets by these vastly different political groups stirred the French public into frenzy. Dreyfusard intellectuals and Dreyfus' family fought to publicize and correct the utter negligence of the French military for which Dreyfus was wrongly suffering. Writers such as Bernard Lazare, Jean Jaurès, Leon Blum, and Alfred's wife Lucie Dreyfus utilized the written word to illuminate to the public the corruption, anti-Semitism, and fear that resulted in the unwarranted theft of five years of a patriot's life. Regardless of these writers' political allegiances, these Dreyfusards believed that Dreyfus was the embodiment of the Republican cause; a man whose plight symbolized the social, judicial, and racial inequalities that impeded on the social progress of the Republic and hindered the nation of France from social advancement and true equality for all its citizens.

Ignoring the anti-Semitic and social injustices surrounding the affair, Lucie Dreyfus wrote with simply one purpose: to correct the unlawful conviction that separated her from her husband. Lucie did not have a political agenda. Rather, she attempted to illustrate that the Republican ideal of justice for all its citizens was withheld from her husband while he suffered in isolation on Devil's Island. The private court-martial that doomed her innocent husband had rejected the basic ideals of the Republic: equal and fair justice for every citizen of France. In a petition to the Chamber of Deputies, Lucie expressed her disdain for the War Ministry for the fact that they had not recognized the blatant disregard of basic judicial procedure regarding her husband's conviction. She wrote that, "[a] French officer has been convicted by a court-martial on the basis of a charge about which he had no knowledge, and that, by consequence, neither he nor his counsel were able to examine. This is a denial of all justice."¹ Lucie thus embarked on a tumultuous and seemingly unwinnable battle against the upper-echelons of the proud French military. She believed that the Republican value of civil equality had been ignored, and it was the military officials' responsibility and duty as soldiers to admit their wrongdoings. Lucie Dreyfus, along with the Dreyfusards, recognized the hypocrisy embodied in the flawed trial that stretched to the most revered level of society, and strove to correct these infringements of social and judicial equality perpetuated by the military officials responsible for this grave judicial wrongdoing.

The flagrant "denial of justice" expressed in Lucie's petition, although not explicitly cited in said petition, is closely tied to the historical anti-Semitic attitudes of the old clerical monarchy. The fact that Alfred Dreyfus was a Jewish military officer

¹ Reprinted in Mathieu Dreyfus, *L'Affaire telle que je l'ai vécue* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), 83.

charged with treason fed the hatred and resentment of xenophobic officials, and much of the French population, who believed that Jews were threatening the sanctity of French society. Much of the anti-Dreyfus literature during the affair was riddled with harsh and deplorable anti-Semitic sentiments, such as Gyp's *Les Izolâtres* and *The Henry Monument*. Dreyfusards such as Léon Blum and Bernard Lazare wrote with the purpose of emphasizing to the public the fact that the anti-Semitic motivation in the Dreyfus conviction undermined universalism and the Republic's attempt to uphold the interests of the nation as a whole over the interests of the individual.

Léon Blum, the first socialist and first Jewish prime minister of France, was a fervent Dreyfusard during his youth. In response to Alfred Dreyfus's death in the summer of 1935, Blum published a series of seven articles that recounted the affair from his perspective. With fascism gaining momentum due to the ascension of Adolf Hitler and the establishment of Benito Mussolini's corporate state, Blum intended to call attention to the need for Jews across France to fight openly against the same oppression and anti-Semitism that condemned an innocent man 41 years earlier. Blum recalls in his *Memories of the Affair* that Jews were extremely reluctant to publically object to the blatant anti-Semitic conviction of Dreyfus and "imagined that anti-Semitic passion would be warded off by their timid neutrality."² Blum yearned for his Jewish compatriots to recognize, "that no precaution, no pretense fooled the adversary, and that they [the Jewish population of France] remained victims offered up by triumphant anti-Dreyfusism or fascism."³ The goal of the Dreyfusards to finally achieve the Republican vision of society did not come to fruition. The responsibility for this failure, according to Blum, fell upon

² Léon Blum. *Souvenirs sur l'affaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 42-44.

³ *Ibid*, 149-153.

those Jews who remained silent and allowed the anti-Semitic sentiments of the French nationals to subvert the Republican dream.

Bernard Lazare, an impassioned anarchist, joined Blum in calling for a “social and political commitment to Jewish preservation” on the part of Jews who did not stand with Lazare and his fellow Dreyfusards in the fight to ensure equality for all citizens, regardless of religious identification.⁴ Lazare publicized the anti-Semitic basis for the conviction of Dreyfus in his brochure *A Judicial Error* published in March 1897. The severity of the punishment and the conviction itself were on the basis, Lazare argues, that Dreyfus was in fact a Jew and “because he was a Jew, the voice of justice and truth could not be heard in his favor, and the responsibility for the condemnation of that innocent men falls entirely on those who provoked it by their vile excitation, lies, and slander”.⁵ The wrongful conviction of Dreyfus echoed the outdated anti-Semitism that pervaded the military and the supporters of the old clerical monarchy. They noted that in a nation that advocated obligatory military service, a soldier had to be able to practice the religion of his choice. The people of the Republic had to throw away their prior notions of xenophobia and fear of the Jewish presence and embrace social and judicial equality for the military, and in turn all citizens of France, in order for the Republic to function and prosper.

Dreyfusards were all bound together by the injustice that was wrongly imposed on an innocent man, but they came from vastly different realms of political thought.

Regardless of one’s political alliance or social ideology, the Dreyfusards believed that the

⁴ Michael Burns. *France and the Dreyfus Affair A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 75.

⁵ Bernard Lazare, *Une erreur judiciaire: L'affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: Stock, 1897), 8-9.

plight of Dreyfus represented the plight of all citizens under the Republic who believed that their inalienable rights as citizens had vanished into thin air. Jean Jaurès, a revolutionary socialist, formulated a socialist message fed from the grand injustice suffered by Alfred Dreyfus and the obvious disregard for the laws protecting individual liberty. The syndicalist goal in France called for the means of production and distribution of industry be placed solely in the hands of the workers. Jaurès, through his artful revolutionary prose in his 1905 article *The Socialist Aim*, was able to tie the socialist regard for the upholding of essential human rights to the neglect of “practical politics” on the part of the military judges and the general bourgeoisie.

Jaurès wrote that Dreyfus’s class, rank, and reputation were unjustly stolen from him and he no longer represented, “anything but humanity itself, at the highest point of misery and despair one could imagine”.⁶ Jaurès presented Dreyfus as a martyr whose plight represented the disregard of the unassailable rights of the individual by the military and the aristocracy, arguing:

He is no longer part of that army that degraded him through criminal error. He is no longer part of those ruling classes who, because of cowardly ambition, hesitate to reestablish for him lawfulness and truth...He is the living witness of the military lie, of political cowardice, of the crimes of authority.⁵

Various political organizations from within France used the Dreyfus Affair as a means for public political protest. Advocates of the Republic capitalized on the ignorant conviction of Dreyfus to voice their opposition to certain aspects of the state. Jaurès wanted to use the affair to incite a socialist revolution and destroy the laws of the Republic that oppressed the working classes and unjustly protected the monopoly of

⁶ Jean Jaurès. *Les Preuves: l'affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: La Petite République, 1989), 11-13.

power held by the military and upper class. Although these political groups had differing means to their political goals concerning the Dreyfus Affair, they all shared a common attitude towards the Republic: that the misguided authority inherently bestowed to the military and the bourgeoisie ignored the basic rights of man and hindered the progress of the Republic.

The anti-Semitism, Catholic monarchism, and nationalism preached by the anti-Dreyfusards were recurring and prevalent points of conflict that arose in French society long after Alfred Dreyfus's acquittal. Rob Kedward, in his book entitled *France and the French: A Modern History*, recounts the effect of the establishment of the Vichy Regime during the German occupation of France during WWII on the ideals of the Republic and the status of French Jews. The Vichy Regime, led by its Marshal of France Philippe Pétain, blamed the French defeat on the individualism championed by the Republic and vilified the Jewish population of France, both recent immigrants and native French Jews, through a series of laws including the, "exclusion from state employment, administration and politics, and from any job in industry, finance and trade dependent on public subsidies".⁷ Themes of anti-Semitism and anti-Republicanism had plagued the Republican dreams of universalism and civic equality since the birth of the Republic in 1870. The model of society for which these Dreyfusard writers strove could not come to fruition until the outdated ideals of clerical monarchism and anti-Semitism disappeared from the obdurate minds of the anti-Dreyfusards.

The authors of pro-Dreyfusard literature were steadfast in their convictions concerning Dreyfus's innocence. They knew that his condemnation was simply a

⁷ Rod Kedward. *France and the French A Modern History*. (Woodstock: Overlook TP, 2007). 253

discriminatory ploy against a Jewish officer on the rise and they worked to illuminate to the French public that a blatant violation of social equality had occurred and threatened the rights of every individual citizen. The work of the Dreyfusards during the affair resembled the struggle between David versus Goliath: the progressive Republican ideology engaged against the anti-Semitic and nationalist ideologies held by the publically revered military and aristocracy. Both sides of the political spectrum in France maintained anti-Semitic resentment. On the right, Catholic monarchists blamed Jews for the revolution and characterized the Jews as the agents of change in French society that they disliked. On the left, syndicalists and laborers blamed the Jews for reaping the benefits of the modern economy at the workers' expense.⁸ The Church was easily able to mobilize an incredible amount of support against the "traitorous Jewish military officer". The Dreyfusards and the advocates of the Republic needed a quick response in order to combat this threat to national sovereignty and correct this monumental judicial injustice. That response came from the inspirational calls for justice and equality by these soldiers of the Republic.

Many of the influential defenders of Dreyfus's innocence received vulgar opposition from the anti-Dreyfusards. In the most extreme cases, these voices of justice were forcibly silenced by unjust imprisonment. Emile Zola, influential essayist and advocate of Dreyfus's innocence, was sentenced to two years in prison for his accusations against the military officials involved in the Dreyfus conviction outlined in his 1898 article *J'Accuse*. Colonel Georges Picquart, the military officer appointed to observe Dreyfus's court martial and a known anti-Semite, recognized that his fellow officers were

⁸ Professor Cole. Lecture: *The Dreyfus Affair, Anti-Semitism and French Society*. 9/21/09

in fact purveyors of deceit concerning the *petit bleu* and its connection to the actual traitor, officer Ferdinand Esterhazy. Picquart was subsequently sent by his superiors on missions far from the Metropole and was eventually unjustly imprisoned for allegedly communicating secret documents to a foreign government and for writing the *petit bleu* in order to frame Esterhazy.⁹ These proponents of civic equality fought against the blatant disregard for the rights of man perpetuated by the proud French military, knowingly ignoring the consequences of their actions for the sake of justice. Through the efforts of these Dreyfusards, along with the efforts of the four authors of these documents, the injustice suffered by Alfred Dreyfus was finally recognized by a military pardon and reinstatement as a Major in 1906 on the basis that the evidence implicating Dreyfus maintained absolutely no credibility.

Regardless of their political ideologies, Dreyfusards were able to use the plight of Alfred Dreyfus as a means to voice their opposition to various aspects of society and popular thinking that infringed on their respective goals for the Republic. The Republic was founded on the belief that all men are created equal, regardless of race, religion, class, or political affiliation. The work of Lucie Dreyfus, Léon Blum, Bernard Lazare, Jean Jaurès, along with countless other Dreyfusard writers, helped illuminate the unjust and outdated obstacles to the Republican vision of a united society.

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⁹ Michael Burns. *France and the Dreyfus Affair A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998). 103-104, 128.

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