

Political Anti-Semitism, Alfred Dreyfus, and Public Discourse

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In late nineteenth century France, anti-Semitism was a growing force within society, and it threatened to dominate as a political ideology. The anti-Semitic fervour that flourished through-out fin-de-siècle France resembled the anti-Semitic fervour that flourished throughout National Socialist Germany. If anti-Semitism was so strong in France, why did it not lead to such extremes similar to those of Germany? France, unlike Germany, had the Dreyfus Affair. This Affair brought the Jewish Question into the public sphere. It polarized French society, and spurred intellectual debate surrounding the merits and basis of anti-Semitism. Thus, when Dreyfus was pardoned, anti-Semitism as an ideology was dismissed in France. This essay will argue two points: firstly, it will contend that anti-Semitism was growing as a political ideology in late nineteenth century France; secondly it will demonstrate that the Dreyfus Affair spurred intellectual debate which successfully halted dominant anti-Semitism as a political force. To accomplish this, it will be divided into three sections: the development of modern anti-Semitism in France, the nature of the Dreyfus Affair, and the supporters of Dreyfus and their roles in decreasing anti-Semitism as an ideological force.

France yielded to anti-Semitism at a less than fervent pace. Early evidence of growing anti-Semitism in France is revealed with the publication of the first anti-Semitic newspaper, *L'Anti-Juif* in 1881.¹ Throughout the following twenty years, France was transformed into an anti-Semitic hotspot primarily due to four reasons: the growing anti-Semitic opposition to the Third Republic, theories of racial science, the influx of Jewish immigration, and the economic failures blamed on Jews.

¹ Barnet Litvinoff, *The Burning Bush: Anti-Semitism and World History*. (London: Collins,

France was governed by the Third Republic, a left of center party which combined democratic political institutions with profound social conservatism.² Jews associated themselves with this republic because they were grateful for the emancipation brought by Napoleon under the first republic. Those opposed to the Third Republic were the royalists, who looked toward a reestablishment of the monarchy, the Catholics, who resented the anti-clericalism, and the army, with a separate caste system of their own.³ The trio shared three common traits: conservatism, anti-republicanism, and in varying degrees, anti-Semitism.⁴ This anti-Semitism provided the opposition with a unifying force which they could use to mobilize their political agendas.⁵

Anti-Semitism as a unifying political force needed strong support if it were to prove useful, and the emergence of racial science provided the perfect buttress. This new “science” promulgated theories that proclaimed Aryans superior and Semites inferior.⁶ New racial science also meant that conversion to Christianity was no longer an option for Jews, since Judaism was declared a race rather than religion. Racial science provided “proof” that Jews were inferior; this belief was especially dangerous during a time of a mass Jewish exodus from Russia to France. Anti-Semitism in France was linked with anti-Semitism in Russia, as many Ashkenazim Jews emigrated to France due to the Russian state sanctioned Pogroms. Statistics reveal a dramatic increase in Jewish immigration. In 1840, 70,000 Jews lived in France. The majority of these Jews were Sephardic, living in the eastern regions of Alsace and Lorraine. Over the next generation, the arrival of 120,000 Ashkenazim Jews dramatically increased the Jewish population within France. Impoverished and culturally different, the

² Jeremy D. Popkin, *A History of Modern France* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 145.

³ Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1965), 183.

⁴ Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*, 183.

⁵ Zeev Sternhell, “The Roots of Popular Anti-Semitism in the Third Republic,” in *Hostages of Modernization: Studies on Modern Anti-Semitism 1870-1922/39, Germany-Great Britain-France*, ed. Herbert A. Strauss (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 471.

⁶ Leslie Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 19.

influx of Jewish population within France created distrust, and added to the negative economic stereotypes already associated with Jews.⁷

Growing anti-Semitism in France was also attributed to economic failures blamed on Jews. The three main economic failures were the great economic depression that began in 1873, the collapse of the Panama Company and the collapse of the Catholic banking establishment. This created the stereotype of the Jew as “banker who produced nothing and grew fat on the labour of others.”⁸ Thus, these incidents led to false beliefs that Jews controlled the economy, and were greedily becoming rich off the backs of French citizens.

All the previous factors combined to create a dangerously anti-Semitic climate within France. All that was needed was a sudden discharge, a spark that would light the fire of anti-Semitism throughout the French nation. This spark was produced by Edouard Drumont, “the most out-standing purveyor of anti-Semitism in French History.”⁹

Drumont wrote the astonishingly anti-Semitic piece entitled: *La France Juive: Essai d'histoire con-temporaine*.¹⁰ As a two volume piece, it led to a single conclusion: since medieval times, the Jews have been responsible for the woes of France.¹¹ It is disturbingly prophetic of the ideology that would flourish within National-Socialist Germany, portraying the physical characteristics of the Jew as synonymous with his moral characteristics; he described the common Jew as having a “hooked nose . . . close packed teeth . . . and the soft, melting hand of the traitor.”¹² In even more dramatic fashion, he wrote: “Jews, vomited from the ghettos of Europe, are now installed as the masters of the historic houses that evoke the most glorious moments of ancient France . . . Jews are the most powerful agents of disorder

⁷ Jean-Marie Mayeur and Madeleine Rebérioux, *The Third Republic from its Origins to the Great War: 1871-1914* (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 200; Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 21, 24.

⁸ Mayeur and Rebérioux, *The Third Republic*, 200.

⁹ Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 24.

¹⁰ Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1980), 294.

¹¹ Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*, 183.

¹² Mayeur and Rebérioux, *The Third Republic*, 183.

the world has ever seen.”¹³ The book was an “instant sensation,” and went through fourteen reprints within a twelvemonth period.¹⁴

Drumont’s book served as the proof needed to substantiate the myth of Jewish power, and fuelled the anti-Jewish sentiment within France. In 1898, “twenty-two anti-Semitic candidates were elected to the Chamber of Deputies.”¹⁵ Anti-Semitic politicians were gaining votes in the government. The new racial ideology was working and anti-Semitism was popular. It seemed as though anti-Semitism would anchor itself within French society, that is, until the advent of the Dreyfus Affair.

Alfred Dreyfus was born into a prominent and wealthy Jewish family in Alsace, and was the first Jew to ascend to the French officer core. In October of 1894, Dreyfus was accused of sending a letter, named *Le bordereau*, to Captain Maximilien Ivon Scharzkoppen, the German military attaché in Paris.¹⁶ The letter announced that Dreyfus intended to send the German embassy military documents. Shortly after the accusation, Dreyfus was arrested and imprisoned.¹⁷ On January fifth he was stripped of his rank, and sent to Devil’s Island, a small islet of the coast of French Guiana. Two years after the initial conviction, Captain Georges Picquart of the French General Staff intercepted and examined a document sent by German military personnel intended for Count Major Ferdinand Esterhazy. In August of the same year, Picquart concluded that Esterhazy was the real traitor, and that Dreyfus was innocent. In November, Picquart revealed his evidence to the French General Staff. To counter Picquart’s attempt to free Dreyfus, Major Hubert Henry of the statistical section of the French army fabricated a letter supposedly sent from the Italian military to their German counterpart. It stated: “I have read that a deputy is going to ask about Dreyfus. If

¹³ Albert S. Lindemann, *The Jew Accused: Three Anti-Semitic Affairs (Dreyfus, Beilis, Frank) 1894-1915* (Cambridge University Press), 57.

¹⁴ Litvinoff, *The Burning Bush*, 206.

¹⁵ Nancy Fitch, “Mass Culture, Mass Parliamentary, and Modern Anti-Semitism: The Dreyfus Affair in Rural France,” *The American Historical Review* 97, no.2 (1992): 58.

¹⁶ Roderick Kedward, *The Dreyfus Affair* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965), 6.

¹⁷ Pierre Birnbaum, *The Anti-Semitic Movement: A Tour of France in 1898* (New York: Hill and Wong, 1998), 337.

new explanations are required at Rome, I shall say I never had any relations with this Jew . . .¹⁸ This new document dismissed Picquart's claim, and he was sent to a post in Tunisia.

Emile Zola shifted the focus of the affair when on January 10, 1898, *L'Aurore* newspaper published his open letter entitled: "J'accuse." Zola's article spurred anti-Dreyfus demonstrations throughout France. The tide turned on August 30, 1898, when Major Henry acknowledged that he forged the second incriminating document. Days later many newspapers demanded an official re-view of the case. After the court heard Dreyfus' case again, his conviction was annulled, and he left Devil's Island the following day. With one last desperate attempt in September 1899, the military court found Dreyfus guilty due to extenuating circumstances and he was sentenced to ten years in prison. Dreyfus appealed to President of the Republic, Emile Loubet, who forthright issued a pardon and freed Dreyfus in 1906.¹⁹

The effects of the Dreyfus affair polarized France into two hostile groups: Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards. Dreyfusards supported Dreyfus, the Third Republic, as well as protestant and anti-Clerical views; while anti-Dreyfusards supported anti-Semitism and Catholicism. To this extent, France was a divided country: anti-clericalism versus Catholicism, the Third Republic versus the Monarchists, Semitism versus anti-Semitism, and Dreyfusard versus anti-Dreyfusard. The confrontation had become both social and political; it was no longer a legal battle concerning the innocence of one man, but instead a wider confrontation between those who were demanding truth, justice and respect for the Rights of Man, and the supporters of *res judicata*, *raison d'Etat* and France for the French.²⁰ The increased tension fuelled riots led by anti-Dreyfusards, initially affecting some thirty major towns:

3000 individuals, young people from the Catholic Clubs, and the boatmen from the port, marched round the streets shouting death threats. After stopping

¹⁸ Birnbaum, *The Anti-Semitic Moment*, 338.

¹⁹ Birnbaum, *The Anti-Semitic Moment*, 340.

²⁰ Eric Cahm, *The Dreyfus Affair: In French Society and Politics* (London: Longman, 1994), 67.

for a time in front of the army corps head-quarters and the army club, where the crowd acclaimed the officers and ordinary soldiers, they rushed at Jewish shops, shattering shop fronts and windows, and tried to break down the door of the synagogue.²¹

In an event that can be described as a less extreme *Kristallnacht*, France's anti-Semitism was becoming extreme.²² The riots of 1898 indicated the real strength of anti-Semitism in France, and showed that large numbers of people were prepared to make the step from holding anti-Semitic opinions to taking anti-Semitic action.²³ Many contemporaries became justifiably alarmed, which is exemplified by one Henri Dagan in 1899 who wrote that "the anti-Semitic movement . . . has become more wide-spread than ever, and asserts itself with new force and boldness."²⁴ If the anti-Dreyfusards won the battle, political anti-Semitism would have a stranglehold on the throat of France.

However, the freedom of the press allowed defenders of Dreyfus to argue their case, and consequently provide an open discourse on the merits and demerits of anti-Semitism. The Dreyfus Affair successfully brought the Jewish Question to the centre of public attention. This gave the opportunity for pro-Semitic thinkers to argue openly about their pro-Jewish ideas in public, which eventually turned the tide of the Affair and led to quelling of political anti-Semitism as an ideological force in France. The following text will display three prominent Dreyfusard activists, and discuss how they individually, while speaking as a single voice, helped curb anti-Semitic thought. The three figures that will be presented are Bernard Lazare, Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, and Emile Zola.

²¹ Cahm, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 71-2.

²² *Kristallnacht*, or "Crystal Night," occurred during the night of November 9, 1938 in Germany. Incited over the radio by Joseph Goebbels, anti-Semitic riots destroyed Jewish businesses and synagogues, while murdering approximately one hundred Jews.

²³ Stephen Wilson, "Antisemitism in France at the time of the Dreyfus Affair," in *Hostages of Modernization: Studies on Modern Anti-Semitism 1870-1922/39, Germany-Great Britain-France*, ed. Herbert A. Strauss (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 558.

²⁴ Stephen, "Antisemitism in France at the time of the Dreyfus Affair," 573.

During a visit to a poor Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, as "voices long since dead" beckoned to him," Bernard Lazare took up the study and defence of Jews.²⁵ One month prior to Dreyfus' court verdict, Lazare defended Jews by describing their social situation. The title of his piece was "The New Ghetto." He argued that "the Jews are rejected by society, not only of their own will, and find themselves faced with a sort of social quarantine and hostile atmosphere, far more pressing than the physical ghetto."²⁶ This article showed readers that Jews were not the conniving, greedy, money lenders they suspected, but instead, a group who is being rejected by their society and forcibly pushed into isolation.

In March 1895, Lazare stepped up his fight against anti-Semitism by publishing a pamphlet entitled "Antisemitism and Revolution." This pamphlet focussed on the interrelationship of anti-Semitism and Socialism; it argued that anti-Semitism in fact did not serve the interest of the working class. He contended that anti-Semitism was instead an effective tool of the bourgeoisie, the Church, and reactionary elements, and therefore, the removal of the Jews would only strengthen the Christian bourgeoisie as well as the hand of clerics and the reactionaries – but would not improve at least the lot of the proletariat.²⁷ This pamphlet shifted the blame away from Jews, and toward the pre-eminent Capitalist system. It told readers the truth. Lazare had publicly exorcised his distaste for anti-Semitic thought, and was now ready to join the ranks of *les Dreyfusards* in opposing the guilty verdict.

Lazare's first publication on the trial was published at the end of 1896. He wrote about the inconsistencies of the evidence used in the trial, and the unjustness of the verdict. Lazare always kept a Jewish position on the issue: "[He] kept the Jewish element in proper perspective, constantly referring to the specific Jewish nature of the Dreyfus Scandal. This attitude went hand in hand with his rejection of antisemitism and growing identification with the oppressed and downtrodden Jewish people . . ."²⁸ Lazare used his public influence

²⁵ Litvinoff, *The Burning Bush*, 210.

²⁶ Richard L. Cohen, "The Dreyfus Affair and the Jews," in *Anti-Semitism through the Ages*, ed. Shmuel Almog (Frankfurt Pergamon Press, 1988), 295.

²⁷ Cohen, "The Dreyfus Affair and the Jews," 296.

²⁸ Cohen, "The Dreyfus Affair and the Jews," 296.

to portray an alternative viewpoint on anti-Semitism, and further the cause of Dreyfus' acquittal.

Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, a liberal Catholic, was a rare species – an outspoken Catholic Dreyfusard, a member of the Catholic Institute, and one of the founders in 1899 of the *Comité Catholique pour la Défense du Droit*.²⁹ Being a Catholic, Leroy-Beaulieu was able to influence the Catholic community who was unfamiliar in hearing the defence of the Jews. On February 1897, before the Catholic Institute of Paris, Beaulieu unmasked anti-Semitism and expanded its ulterior motives; he argued that anti-Semitism embraced wider worlds than met the eye, and it appeared under the sanction of three principles: defence of religion, defence of native land, and defence of society.³⁰ He concluded that anti-Semitism was a mask for those who refuted different views on religion, France, and society. Attentive to the changing political climate, Leroy-Beaulieu warned against the danger hidden in the popular nature of French anti-Semitism and advocated a more vigorous opposition.³¹ His main point of reference reverberated back to the days of the Revolution: all citizens must equally enjoy the legal basis of society; the slightest infringement will not only harm the Jew, but endanger the welfare of other minorities and especially the Catholic bodies which are in any case subject to severe attack by society.³²

Leroy-Beaulieu accomplished two main tasks with this writing: he unmasked anti-Semitism, and warned the public about its danger. Beaulieu was successful in identifying the motives of anti-Jewish sentiment. He tore off the wool that had been covering so many eyes, and revealed that anti-Semitism had less to do with Jews as being the malaise of French society, and more to do with it being a rationalization of the elite to keep their interests prominent, these interests being the French defence of religion, native land, and society. He was also revealed how detrimental anti-Semitic behaviour could be to a society and their freedom. He discussed that racial prejudice would not stop with Jews, but continue with

²⁹ Cohen, "The Dreyfus Affair and the Jews," 303.

³⁰ Cohen, "The Dreyfus Affair and the Jews," 304.

³¹ Cohen, "The Dreyfus Affair and the Jews," 304.

³² Cohen, "The Dreyfus Affair and the Jews," 304.

other minorities in France. It is as though Beaulieu foresaw the events of Hitlerite Germany, and how anti-Semitism led to anti-homosexuality, anti-Slavicism, anti-Socialism, et cetera. He revealed to the masses that anti-Jewish sentiment was not based on fact, but fallacy, and that this fallacy was dangerous to the free society. Leroy-Beaulieu upheld the tradition of the Revolution together with the principle of humane, universal nationalism.³³

Emile Zola is the third key Dreyfusard figure, and arguably the most famous. He began his attack in response to the Catholic Journal *La France Catholique*, which encouraged its Catholic readers to see a painting depicting a ritual murder supposedly committed by Jews.³⁴ Outraged, Zola published articles in *Le Figaro* that denounced medieval anti-Semitic outbursts. He wrote sarcastically “Let us devour each other because we do not shout in the same way and because our hair grows differently.”³⁵ Zola defended Jews by stating that they were being attacked due to unfair and illogical reasoning, and reminded French citizens that Jews were “our equals and our brothers.”³⁶

Emile Zola became an official member of *les Dreyfusards* on November 13, 1897, when he met with Bernard Lazare who showed him Picquart’s evidence. Zola proceeded to write articles that defended the Dreyfusards, but due to the subsequent loss of subscribers, *Le Figaro* was forced to abandon its support of Dreyfus and deprived Zola of a platform.³⁷ As an alternative, Zola published pamphlets. These pamphlets cautioned the French of the reactionary threats posed by anti-Dreyfusards, anti-Semites, as well as elements within the Church. This is similar to the warning given by Leroy-Beaulieu who cautioned how the effects of anti-Semitism jeopardised the freedom of France, especially the freedom of small minorities within France. Zola’s pamphlets also urged the public to think for themselves. In a letter to France, published on December 14, 1897, Zola asked France: “Have you really been convinced by the most blatant lies?” He continues, “France, what has happened? How

³³ Cohen, “The Dreyfus Affair and the Jews,” 304.

³⁴ Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 113.

³⁵ Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 113.

³⁶ Emile Zola, *The Dreyfus Affair: ‘J’accuse’ and other Writings*, ed. Alain Pages, trans. Eleanor Levieux (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 15.

³⁷ Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 113.

have your goodhearted, commonsensical people let fear make them so ferocious and intolerance plunge them into darkness?”³⁸ Zola was the voice of reason: he urged readers question their anti-Semitic feelings and to question the merits of anti-Semitism.

After the acquittal of Esterhazy and Picquart’s arrest, it seemed as though the Dreyfusards were losing ground; it was a bleak moment. But, similar to an ocean, with its ebb and its flow, the bleak moment transformed into a vibrant one, when Zola used his worldwide reputation to let the truth flow. In what Jules Guesde stated as being “the greatest revolutionary act of the century,” Zola sent his letter to the president of the Republic, and the famous article, “*J'accuse*,” was published and read all over Paris on the morning of June 13, 1898:

One wicked man has led it all, done it all: Lt-Col du Paty de Clam. At the time he was only a Major. He is the entire Dreyfus Affair. Not until a fair inquiry has clearly established his actions and his responsibilities will we understand the Dreyfus Affair. He appears to have an unbelievably fuzzy and complicated mind, haunted with implausible plots and indulging in the methods that litter cheap novels – stolen papers, anonymous letters, rendez-vous in deserted places, mysterious women who flit around at night to peddle damaging proof. It was his idea to dictate the bordereau to Dreyfus; it was his idea to examine it in a room entirely lined with mirrors; it was Paty du Clam, Major Forzinetti tells us, who went out with a dark lantern intending to slip into the cell where the accused man was sleeping and flash the light on his face all of a sudden so that he would be taken by surprise and blurt out a confession. And there is more to reveal, but it is not up to me to reveal it all; let them look, let them find what there is to be found. I shall simply say that Major du Paty de Clam, in charge of investigating the Dreyfus Affair, in his capacity as a criminal police

³⁸ Zola, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 15.

officer, bears the great-est burden of guilt – in terms of chronological order and rank – in the appalling miscarriage of justice that has been committed.³⁹

Zola recounted the stages of the affair, and in doing so, deliberately opened himself up to charges of libel.⁴⁰ He accused by name the officers, war ministers, handwriting experts, and court martials of crimes, conspiracies, and cover ups.⁴¹ The edition sold out. Anti-Dreyfusards were furious, and staged protests which escalated into demonstrations and riots.

Emile Zola's contribution to combat anti-Semitism and release Dreyfus was enormous. He successfully brought the public the true facts concerning anti-Semitism and Dreyfus, and placed considerable pressure on those responsible for Dreyfus' arrest and imprisonment. He pushed aside the myths and rumours concerning the Affair, and in its place, he presented reliable and hard evidence that proved the innocence of Dreyfus.

These three figures, and many more Dreyfusards, were successful in turning the tide of political anti-Semitism. They challenged the writings of Drumont and won. After the victory of the Dreyfus Affair, no free French government used political anti-Semitism as an ideology.⁴² The years following the Dreyfus Affair would reveal that anti-Semitism as a political ideology was lost in France. Anti-Semitism had failed to provide the unifying element for a successful popular opposition movement.⁴³ By 1904, the *Jeunesse Antisemitique* and the *Federation Nationa AntiJuive* were almost without members, meanwhile anti-

³⁹ Mayeur and Rebérioux, *The Third Republic*, 183.; Zola, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 44.

⁴⁰ Zola was tried for libel. During his trial, Zola planned to cover the details of the Dreyfus Affair, but the court would only discuss evidence related to Esterhazy. He was found guilty, and was fined and condemned to a year's imprisonment. An appeal quashed the verdict on technicalities, and ordered a second trial to be held Versailles on July 18, 1898. It was clear that Zola would not be allowed to elaborate on the accusations made in his letter, and he left for Britain in exile. Derfler, *The Dreyfus Af-fair*, 114.

⁴¹ Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair*, 113.

⁴² The Vichy Government enacted anti-Jewish laws, but these were done so under the influence of the Nazi dictatorship.

⁴³ Stephen, "Antisemitism in France at the time of the Dreyfus Affair," 580.

Semitic leaders had abandoned the struggle; Drumont went into virtual retirement after the Affair, and died in obscurity in 1917.⁴⁴

At this moment, I would like to conclude by contextualising my thesis into a more general framework. Unlike National Socialist Germany, fin-de-siècle France maintained its political rights and freedoms. The French Flag represented more than three vertical lines dressed in blue, white, and red, it represented the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. France strongly believed that “the free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man.”⁴⁵ Therefore, a significant difference between French anti-Semitism and German anti-Semitism is that, during the height of French anti-Semitism, there was a government who supported free speech and was based on a principle that stated “no one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions.”⁴⁶ In contrast, National Socialist Germany did not have a government who supported free press. Their government zealously supported anti-Semitism, and would ban writers and writings that stated otherwise. Therefore, a more generalized version of my thesis could state that anti-Semitism in France did not develop to such extremes as in Germany because France was a free society. Therefore, in France, public figures such as Beaulieu, Lazare, and Zola were able to display the rational view that anti-Semitism is irrational. When Dreyfus gained liberty, the fight against political anti-Semitism was won.

⁴⁴ Stephen, “Antisemitism in France at the time of the Dreyfus Affair,” 580.

⁴⁵ Dennis Sherman, *Western Civilization: Sources, Images, and Interpretation* (Lisbon: McGrawHill, 2000), 86.

⁴⁶ Sherman, *Western Civilization*, 86.

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****Media Editor's Note:** Minor formatting and punctuation errors in the endnotes were fixed to bring the citations into closer accord with Chicago Manual of Style guidelines. The errors of information omission that remain result from the original publication and not this transcription.