THE MISTAKE THAT CHANGED FRANCE

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The trial and accusations of Captain Alfred Dreyfus at the end of the nineteenth century was not just about an unfair trial – it shaped the government of France and the opinions of many people on the issues of race and the power of the government. First, one has to know the basics of what became know as the “Dreyfus Affair”. Then, the positions and theories of the opposing sides will be explored. Lastly, we’ll look at the long-range effects of the case.

First of all, there is the story of the court case itself. Alfred Dreyfus was born on October 9, 1859 in Alsace, France. He became an artillery captain attached to the French General Staff. Dreyfus was ambitious, relatively wealthy, and a Jew. According to Guy Chapman, some officers testified that Dreyfus was not well-liked. Others said he was very intelligent, but a braggart (Derfler, Chapman 52). He had lots of money, but he spent it on women (Snyder 389). Then in 1894 he was arrested, charged with selling military secrets to the Germans. Up until now, “The reports of his commanding officers had been uniformly excellent” (Derfler, Chapman 52 ). He may not have been well liked, but he did his job well. So why was Dreyfus suspected? A letter with a list of documents pertaining to the French military was found in the office of the German military attaché in Paris. This list included a description of a French field manual and new artillery weapons. To find a suspect, the investigators used this letter, or bordereau, to analyze the handwriting of different officers. By a process of elimination, Dreyfus was found guilty. A closed court martial convicted him of treason and he was sent to Devil’s Island for life imprisonment. Obviously, the charges were not very substantial. During the court martial, however, the tribunal was furnished with a secret dossier not shared with the defense. So Dreyfus was denied the right to examine the evidence against him.
Three years later, Major Georges Piquart became the head of the Statistical Section of the French War Office. Another letter from the German war office was discovered, requesting “additional information”. It was addressed to Major Walsin-Esterhazy, whose handwriting Piquart compared with that of the bordereau. It was similar. Piquart tried to reopen the case because he suspected Esterhazy was involved, but the military transferred him to Tunisia. Esterhazy was then acquitted by a military court. But the man in charge of counter-espionage, Joseph Henry, knew that the evidence against Dreyfus was not very strong. So he forged letters from the Italian military attaché to the German War Office, wording them to give the impression that Dreyfus was guilty. These letters were put in the dossier of the prosecution. Piquart questioned one of these letters, and Joseph Henry was arrested. He left a confession, then committed suicide. Shortly afterwards, Esterhazy confessed.

The highest court of appeal put Dreyfus before a court-martial at Rennes in 1899. Dreyfus was again condemned, but with extenuating circumstances and his sentence was reduced to 10 years. The president of France then pardoned Dreyfus, but he was not restored to the army until 1906, when the highest court of appeal ruled the Rennes’ judgment as “wrongful and erroneous” (Dansette 1062). That, in a nutshell, is the confusing story of the Dreyfus Affair.

Next, we will explore the different sides of the case. Some people who claimed Dreyfus was innocent felt that Dreyfus was convicted simply because he was a Jew. If the French military couldn’t come up with any concrete evidence, the best course of action would be to accuse someone already unpopular. And the fact that Dreyfus was a Jew would make it seem justified in the anti-Semitic eyes of the public. Support for this
theory comes from the fact the there was rampant anti-Semitism present in France in the late 1800s (www.pro-net.co.uk, Brendan King 1). The author Emile Zola wrote an article in 1896, over a year before he became involved in the Dreyfus Case, entitled “A Plea for the Jews”. In it he addresses the “campaign that people in France are trying to mount against the Jews” (Zola 2). He was “continually stunned to see that such a return to fanaticism, such an attempt to wage a holy war (against the Jews) can have occurred in our day, in this great Paris of ours, amid the good people of France” (Zola 6). There were over 200 million Catholics and barely five million Jews, but the Catholics “cry out in terror and make the most appalling din, as if hordes of vandals had swarmed over the country!” (Zola 4). The head of the French Statistical Section’s counterespionage unit, Col. Jean-Conrad Sandherr, was known for his anti-Semitic views (Derfler xi). After Dreyfus was sent to Devil’s Island, ‘La Libre Parole’ (a right-wing French newspaper) intensified its attacks on the Jews, because what Dreyfus did was “further evidence of Jewish treachery” (www.us-israel.org 3). This seems to make the accusation of Dreyfus one of bigotry.

But was prejudice the reason Dreyfus was convicted? For one thing, Picquart, the man who re-opened the Dreyfus case, was anti-Semitic (www.us-israel.org 2). This is the man who discovered and tried to expose the guilt of Esterhazy. He was anti-Semitic, but he was trying to clear the name of a Jew! According to Chapman, “Anti-Semitism no doubt existed, but it cannot be shown to have played a dominant part in the arrest and trial of Dreyfus” (Derfler, Chapman 53). He feels that it was the press covering the story that gave the trial an anti-Semitic spin. There is also the issue of whether Dreyfus used his religion to help prove his innocence or to hide his guilt. At the time of his first trial,
Dreyfus was widely believed to be guilty. Now that we have the luxury of looking back on the past, we see that none of the evidence could have convicted him. Therefore Dreyfus was not just hiding a crime by saying the only reason for his conviction was his religion.

Another theory is that Dreyfus was accused and not pardoned for so long because the French military simply did not want to admit its mistake. Reviewing the case would only “undermine confidence in the army, on which the salvation of the country depended. Deception was preferable to disorder” (Dansette 1062). So it would be better for one man to suffer in order that the army power-structure could remain firm. France had arrested the wrong man, but instead of releasing Dreyfus and bringing in Esterhazy, they let Esterhazy go and kept Dreyfus!

Arguments for or against Dreyfus were also based on the attitude towards the government/military structure. Did French leaders have the right to suppress Dreyfus’ rights (assuming he was innocent) if it was for the good of the nation? The trial forced people to re-evaluate their political and military views. At this time in history, the French were still humiliated by their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, and Dreyfus therefore became a scapegoat for French problems (Snyder xxi). The French people did not want to see their leaders make another mistake. If someone was endangering their country, they wanted the traitor found and punished. In this way the government was under a lot of pressure – if it was proved that Dreyfus wasn’t the criminal, then who was? The traitor would still be at large.

Was Dreyfus the victim of military leaders? Or was he a ‘threat to the Republic?’ According to J. Salwyn Schapiro (Snyder 388), the one hope of the enemies of the French
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Republic lay in the Army. At any moment, they could restore the monarchy. The army was sworn to defend the Republic, but its officers were Royalists and members of the upper class (Snyder 388). In other words, the army was prepared to take over the government if it wanted to. Since Dreyfus was in the military, he could have been seen as a political threat. But after the Dreyfus Affair, military power was shown to be subordinate to the power of the people (Snyder 388). The opinions and unrest of the French people are what influenced the final verdict on Dreyfus. So the military did not have complete control.

The French chose their position on the Affair based partly on their political views. At the time of the Affair, France did not have a strong government. The French republic was also not popular with all French citizens. Jacques Kayser (Snyder 391) feels that there were many people who wanted to restore the monarchy in France, but they couldn’t decide on who would be king. This division gave the Republic an opportunity to gain enough votes to stay in power. When the French National Assembly voted on what type of government to have, republicanism won by only one vote. At the time of the Dreyfus affair, people wanted a solid government, not one that was split and made mistakes (like arresting the wrong man for treason!).

At the time of the case, France became divided into two groups – Dreyfusards (supporters of Dreyfus) and Anti-Dreyfusards (Dansette 1061). The Dreyfusards were made up of leftist politicians, socialists, and anarchists. They brought together and rallied “the anti-clerical, anti-militartist, and anti-monarchist sentiments of the French liberal tradition” (Snyder, Hans Kohn 388). Zola and a socialist leader named Jean Jaures felt the affair was an example of military dictatorship and clerical reaction. The clerical
accusations were aimed at the Jesuits because they educated many future military officers. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, “The political right and the leadership of the Catholic Church... declared the Dreyfus case to be a conspiracy of Jews and Freemasons designed to damage the prestige of the army and thereby destroy France” (www.us-israel.org 2). However, Pope Leo XIII did not like these partisan conflicts, and so he made it understood that he felt Dreyfus was a victim (Dansette 1062). This showed that the Catholic Church was not against Dreyfus, which had been another suspicion.

The Church in France had many ties with the government and they had great influence on each other. But Guy Chapman does not feel that the Affair was a church conspiracy. According to him, the French officers were almost all nominal Catholics, but as a whole, the officer class, particularly in the highest ranks, was at best neutral towards the regime (Derfler, Chapman 50). In other words, the army may have been Catholic, but they were not very political. So there cannot be a Church/government plot going on here. Further evidence against this type of conspiracy comes from the fact that in the military “the half-yearly reports required statements on an officer’s morality, education, and behavior, but not on his politics or religion” (Derfler, Pimodan 50). The trial eventually led to a separation of Church and State in France.

Anti-Dreyfusards, on the other hand, were nationalists who took all situations in the context of their relationship to France (Dansette 1062). They are the ones who felt the case was trying to undermine confidence in the army and that, as stated before, “deception was preferable to disorder” (Dansette 1062).

The long-term effects of the trial are also varied. As previously mentioned, the trial led to the separation of Church and State in France. The trial made people think
more about their individual rights and about what kind of role the government played in their lives. In reading through articles about the trial, this author came across many references as to how Dreyfus’ trial showed that a small group of people could overcome the odds, even in the face of a huge opponent. “The Affair remains the prime example of a few men who gathered enough courage to withstand hostile public opinion and thus helped to preserve the institutions that could enable others to do the same” (Derfler ix). In this sense, generations to come learned from the Dreyfusards that it is possible to change government policy. They learned which of their individual rights guarded their opposition to the government.

The leading critic of the prosecution was Emile Zola. In 1898, Zola wrote a letter to the French President called “J’accuse”. It was published in a newspaper for all to see. Zola “wrote it to cure an injustice, to scold a nation, and to try to shame it into doing the right thing (www.pbs.org, Rosenblatt 1). In “J’accuse,” Zola scolded the French president for letting the affair drag on without justice. He accused Major du Paty de Clam of fabricating the affair and making it much bigger than it needed to be. According to Zola, Paty de Clam picked out Dreyfus and made him the traitor. The military was working against Dreyfus, influencing the trial in every way possible to make sure he was charged. Zola effectively used the press to shape public opinion and aid in the restoration of Dreyfus.

Therefore, the Dreyfus Affair was not just an interesting trial with a few mistakes. It ended up changing the nation of France for years to come. It affected the way people felt about the government, about Jews, and about the power of the military. Writers like Zola and supporters of Dreyfus showed future generations that it was possible to change
government policy. They stood up to the government - and won. The Dreyfus Affair truly was a landmark case.
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