

The Role of Émile Zola's "J'accuse" in The Dreyfus Affair

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**ABSTRACT:**

The Dreyfus Affair is the story of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a young Jewish officer in the French army, wrongly convicted of treason. Dreyfus became a polarizing symbol, mobilizing all of France in a battle between the Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards; forces that represented defense of the ideals of the Republic versus a blind loyalty towards the honor of the army and state.

In this study, I focus on the role of "J'accuse" in The Dreyfus Affair and especially in the acquittal of Dreyfus. I provide some socio-political context from which The Affair emerges and examine the role of the media, proceeding to give some detail on Dreyfus' life, facts about the case and how Zola's involvement in the Affair led to his publication of "J'accuse". In analyzing "J'accuse" from a literary, and political standpoint I show how it was a turning point in The Dreyfus Affair, which, by causing Zola to be tried, led to the acquittal of Dreyfus by re-publicizing the case.

I did not limit myself to one particular source, but rather I tried to gather as much information possible from various sources to paint an accurate and broad painting. "J'Accuse" had an overwhelming effect on the Affair, more than I had initially imagined. In my research I discovered that the true breakthrough for the Dreyfusards was actually Zola's trial. In this trial the dubious defense of the General Staff was revealed. I try to trace this passage from Dreyfus Zola to Zola's trial to pointing towards the eventual acquittal of Alfred Dreyfus.

Word Count: 254

One hundred and twelve years ago at Dreyfus's degradation ceremony, thousands gathered shouting "Death to the Jews" as his stripes were ripped from his uniform and his sword was broken in two. Today, as the one hundredth anniversary of Alfred Dreyfus' acquittal passes, many of the same sentiments and prejudices which divided France so long ago seem to be resurfacing. The Dreyfus Affair is as important as ever and Zola's words of wisdom still maintain their value. Anti-Semitism in France, which has a long and bitter history, is on the rise. In 1985, the French military refused to accept a statue of Dreyfus for the École Militaire which had been commissioned by the president Francois Mitterand. When it was finally displayed in the corner of the Tuileries gardens in 1988, Dreyfus' tomb was defaced with swastikas and anti-Semitic graffiti. Sadly in 1994, the centennial of Dreyfus's first conviction, a French army historian, Colonel Paul Gaujac, still cast doubt on the entire incident by stating that Dreyfus's innocence is "the thesis generally accepted by historians". (Riding 1) Also, "France for the French", a slogan popularized in Drumont's *La Libre Parole* from the Dreyfus era is still used in France today. Finally, a poll taken in the 1990's showed that almost 70 percent of the French population still believed that "the lessons of the Dreyfus Affair are still of present interest." (Burns 192) The Dreyfus Affair is still a relevant topic, easily connected and applicable to recent events. The author of the aforementioned article describes the kidnapping and murder of a 23 year old French Jew named Halimi in the year 2000. The gang leader responsible for the killing later said that, "Halimi was chosen because Jews are wealthy". He then makes an interesting connection to the Dreyfus Affair stating, "In a sense, then, today's Dreyfus Affair is the Halimi case. And both illustrate how easily a formally civilized society can slide into uncivilized behavior." (Riding 1)

Originally, I would have liked to examine the press's role in that same degradation of civilized society mentioned above, however I realized that 4000 words would not suffice. Instead, I decided to examine the role of one of the most important documents in the Affair, namely Emile Zola's open letter to the President of the republic, "J'accuse". This document exemplifies the power and persuasiveness of the press and its ability to turn the tides of public opinion. Hence the research question emerges: What role did "J'accuse" play in the Dreyfus Affair and more specifically in Dreyfus' acquittal? Emile Zola's J'Accuse played a quintessential role in Dreyfus's acquittal by presenting the entirety of the affair to the public in a cohesive, comprehensive and inspiring manner. His individual effort "could not help but push the Dreyfus case into a full-blown political and social affair." (Burns 92) More importantly, Zola's trial for slander, presented another opportunity for the Dreyfusards (supporters of Dreyfus) to present the fact and expose the truth.

In order to understand The Dreyfus Affair in its entirety, one must understand the socio-political context from which it emerged. The Dreyfus Affair was the culmination of an amalgamation of national sentiments, fears and paranoia. The French were still recovering from their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, and were increasingly fearful of the new German Empire which was growing, both economically and militarily. A scandal among prominent Jewish businessmen concerning the Panama Canal Company in the years leading up to the affair, in conjunction with rising and growing anti-Jewish publications, led to an increase of bigotry and racism, especially towards Jews. One example is Eduard Drumont and his anti-Semitic publication "La Libre Parole". In 1892, two years preceding the Affair, Drumont wrote an article entitled

"Jews in the Army" in which he viciously attacked Jews who seemed to be gaining influence in the army and in society.

When news of a Jewish officer leaking information to the Germans emerged, not only did the press pounce on the opportunity, but all of France was seized by a hysterical frenzy of paranoia, fear and racism. "We must do away with that dangerous inequality and obtain more respect for our authentic citizens, the children of Gaul and not Judaea..."

(Burns 7)

Michael Burns, Professor of Modern History at Mount Holyoke College discusses other contributing factors,

Liberated by the press law of 1881, which rolled back many governments restraints, a journalistic revolution swept across the fin de siècle. With literacy rates rising and new print technologies transforming the communications industry, hundreds of daily and weekly broadsheets and newspapers... reached a wide and eager audience of new readers, many of whom still believed, as they had been taught to believe, what they read." (Burns 4)

The Dreyfus Affair marked the first major trial in history in which the press was used as a tool and weapon. The French people as well as the various publications were highly polarized, quickly choosing a side and supporting it fervently throughout the entire affair. This battle emerged between two camps: the Anti-dreyfusards (those who were against Dreyfus) and the Dreyfusards (supporters). The two opposing sides or camps quickly realized the potential and power of the press and immediately took advantage of this opportunity. Many right wing publications such as *La Libre Parole*, *L'Autorité*, *Le Journal* and *Le Temps* emerged and grew as a result. (Bredin 78)

Alfred Dreyfus was born in Mulhouse on October 9, 1859, into a Jewish family. In 1871, under the Treaty of Frankfurt which ended the Franco-Prussian war, Alsatians

were given the chance to opt for French citizenship. The Dreyfus family chose to become French citizens.

By 1894, the year of his arrest, Dreyfus had established a family and had become an artillery officer in the French army. Alfred said the following on the matter:

A brilliant and easy career opened before me; the future appeared full of promise. After my days of work, I found the rest and charm of family life... We were perfectly happy, and our first child, a son, brought cheer to our home; I had no material cares, and felt the deep affection of my family and my wife's family. Everything in life seemed to smile on me." (Dreyfus 38)

However in late September 1894, a document recovered by the Statistical Section (the intelligence unit of the French military) now famously known as the "Bordereau", would change everything for Alfred Dreyfus. Upon receiving news of a traitor within the General Staff who was an officer, General Mercier, Minister of War, carefully began his search. When Dreyfus emerged as the key suspect, Mercier consulted the President of the Republic. The president advised Mercier to abandon the affair for lack of proof. Another reason was, "The Army would have nothing to gain from the public denunciation of an officer in Germany's service." (Bredin 66) Mercier continued his search regardless of his superior's advice. In order to assure the military would not back out; the press was alerted of the situation. The government was now committed. *La Libre Parole* published an article, unleashing the fury and might of the press onto all of France.

Is it true that an extremely important arrest has recently been made by order of the military authorities? The arrested individual... has been accused of espionage... The officer who is vile enough to sell the secrets of our national defense... is Captain Dreyfus." (Burns 34)

Dreyfus was arrested, court-martialed and sentenced to exile and imprisonment on Devil's Island. The case would be revived again in 1896 when Georges Picquart, chief of the Statistical Section found evidence pointing towards the real traitor, Commandant

Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy. Esterhazy would soon be acquitted, and Dreyfus found guilty at a second court martial in 1899, only to be pardoned a week later.

The main scandal of the Dreyfus Affair rested on a serious miscarriage of justice as well as multiple forgeries and cover-ups. Alfred Dreyfus was convicted the first time solely based on one unsigned and undated document (the Bordereau) merely because his handwriting somewhat resembled that of the document. He was convicted a second time because of documents forged by Commandant Henry. Also, a secret dossier was used by the prosecutors, which was unlawfully kept from the defense.

One might ask: why wasn't France more liberal? The church and army at this time were very powerful institutions which exerted a considerable control. In fact church and state were not separated until 1905. Rising nationalistic and racist tides caused by the defeat in 1871 Franco-Prussian war and increasing tensions worldwide, also contributed. However, for the main reason one must examine the zeitgeist of the era. On one hand there was a sense that civilization had reached a plateau and the quality of life would only get better. On the other there was fear, nationalism, hatred, pride, and shame which conflicted directly with the first statement and was worsened by the press (a potent force which cannot be neglected). This must have been a very frightening time to live in. The only constant at this time was change.

Two camps soon emerged: the Dreyfusards and the Anti-Dreyfusards. Entire publications and newspapers either deliberately chose or shifted towards a side throughout the course of the Affair. The Anti-Dreyfusard press was especially known for its vicious personal attacks and anti-Semitic overtones. One example of an Anti-Dreyfusard newspaper that was especially anti-Semitic, was Eduard Drumont's *La Libre*



Parole. Underneath the name of the newspaper, the slogan "France for the French" was written.

The Dreyfusard movement did not gain momentum immediately. Originally, the Dreyfusards were comprised of Dreyfus's family members, lead by Mathieu Dreyfus, Alfred's brother, who worked tirelessly to clear his brother's name. As time went by, important people such as Georges Clemenceau, Auguste Scheurer-Kestner (vice president of the French Senate), Theodor Herzl and finally Emile Zola joined.

Emile Zola was a world renowned author. Although he did not become a Dreyfusard until later, he voiced his concern about the growing anti-Semitic tides in an article entitled "Pour les Juifs" written in 1896.

For several years, with growing surprise and disgust, I have been following the campaign that people in France are trying to mount against the Jews. It seems to me a monstrosity...something that is altogether beyond the bounds of common sense, truth and justice, a blind and stupid thing that would drag us back centuries in time...that would [ultimately] lead to religious persecution, which is the worst of abominations and would bathe every country in blood. (Pagés 2)

He published several articles meant to stir public opinion, including "Lettre a` la Jeunesse" and later "Lettre a` la France". It was only on the eve of Esterhazy's trial in 1898 that Zola fully committed himself to the Dreyfusard campaign.

Zola was disgusted with the trends shaping French society and politics. The very ideals which France was founded on were being trampled, while the virtues it stood against were being celebrated. When Esterhazy was acquitted, it was as if Dreyfus's guilt had been reaffirmed. In response Zola dealt his most important blow yet. He published "J'Accuse", an open letter to the president of the French republic on January 13, 1898 laying out the entirety of the Dreyfus Affair to the public and accusing prominent

members of the General Staff for their involvement and crimes. 300,000 copies of a special edition "L'Aurore", a Dreyfusard newspaper, were printed. Within the first hours 200,000 were sold. Interestingly, Georges Clemenceau, who would later become the prime minister of France, coined the title J'accuse. (126 Schechter)

"J'accuse" exaggerated several people's role in the Affair, while neglecting others. Marcel Thomas stated the following, "It was quite knowingly that Zola enlarged, exaggerated, and schematized – in order to impress public opinion." (Bredin 249)

Previously, details and facts about the affair had been presented or revealed to the public in small fragments, making fair or accurate judgment on a personal level, highly improbable.

Zola's genius lay in understanding that at the time there was nothing more that could be expected from legal options, that the only recourse was public opinion. In order to mobilize it, it would be necessary to stop presenting the Dreyfus Affair in small fragments, in details that were often incomprehensible. With total scorn for considerations of prudence, without any ethical or juridical precautions, what was needed was to deliver to the public a striking text which would summarize the Affair at the risk of simplification and bring to light the crimes of the General Staff...." (245 Bredin)

One must examine the text of "J'Accuse" to fully understand its impact and significance. The language, intensity, and direct nature of "J'Accuse" contributed to its success, as if speaking directly to the reader with forceful emotions.

They have dared to do this. Very well, then, I shall dare too. I shall tell the truth, for I pledged that I would tell it...I will not be an accessory to the fact. If I were, my nights would be haunted by the specter of that innocent man so far away, suffering the worst kind of torture as he pays for a crime he did not commit. (Zola 43)

Zola, at times, attacks high military officials fearlessly. Other times he uses wit and sarcasm, insulting the president himself,

Will you allow me to tell you that although your star has been in the ascendant hitherto, it is now in danger of being dimmed by the most shameful and indelible of stains? You had emerged unscathed from libelous slurs... (Zola 43)

The text reads less like an article, and more like a work of fiction.

Ah, for anyone who knows the true details of the first affair, what a nightmare it is! Major du Paty de Clam arrests Dreyfus and has him placed in solitary confinement. He rushes to the home of Madame Dreyfus and terrifies her, saying that if she speaks up, her husband is lost. Meanwhile the unfortunate man is tearing out his hair, clamoring his innocence. (Zola 45)

This accessible writing allowed for the average reader to feel engaged and understand the complexity and importance of the case. The article is also clearly written, tracing the entirety of the affair from beginning to the time of publication of "J'accuse". Throughout the article Zola builds the tension and suspense, leading up to and climaxing with accusations and crimes committed by the main conspirators,

I accuse General Merceir of having been an accomplice, at least by weak-mindedness...

I accuse the War Office of having conducted an abominable campaign in the press, particularly in L'Eclair and in L'Echo de Paris in order to cover up its misdeeds and lead public opinion astray...

Finally, I accuse the first court martial of having violated the law by sentencing a defendant on the basis of a document which remained secret, and I accuse the second court martial of having covered up that illegal action, on orders, by having, in its own turn, committed the judicial crime of knowingly acquitting a guilty man (Zola 52)

The rhythmic power of the repetition of "J'accuse" transfixed the reader. Zola finishes by proclaiming his motivations and reasoning,

I have but one passion, one for seeing the light, in the name of humanity which has so suffered and which is entitled to happiness. (Zola 53)

"J'Accuse" was also very effective because Zola had much to lose. He puts himself in the position of being a martyr, knowingly publishing an article that will end his career and future ambitions and surely land him in jail.

In making these accusations, I am fully aware that my action comes under Articles 30 and 31 of the law of 29 July 1881 on the press, which makes libel a punishable offence. I deliberately expose myself to that law. (Zola 52)

This sacrifice gives even more validity and punch to the text. Zola would not have publicly proclaimed what he did, had he not been absolutely convinced of what he was saying.

I admire Zola's courage. Not many people would have sacrificed what he did for an idea or for what was right. I feel as if our time lacks not only a person capable of such a blow but also the romantic ideals and notions which allow such a person to exist and act accordingly.

The publication of "J'Accuse" marked a defining point for the Dreyfusards and the Affair as a whole. Emile Zola's battle cry for justice, transformed the Dreyfus Affair in one single day. The Dreyfusards were no longer a small contingent of individuals bent on freeing an innocent man. Their struggle was now seen as a moral one, expanding far beyond Dreyfus and Devil's Island (where he was imprisoned), to injustice and immorality within government everywhere. The Dreyfusards became the party of justice, and Dreyfus became the symbol or paradigm on which they were united and coordinated their efforts.

The day after "J'accuse" was published... the first public petition demanding the revision, or judicial review, of the Dreyfus case [was written]... *L'aurore*, published the names of nearly fifteen hundred supporters. (Burns 110)

Another effect of the publication of "J'Accuse" was a surge in the popularity and support for the Dreyfusards. A defense committee was set up in order to help Zola at his trial, attracting many intellectuals including journalists, foreign diplomats, politicians, professors, writers, and artists. Georges Clemenceau wrote about the matter in "L'Aurore" saying,

They have rallied around an idea and through their peaceful revolt they formed the origins of a movement of opinion that rises above all diverse interests." (Burns 110)

Zola's "J'Accuse" sparked an intellectual revolution and created a common ground on which these intellectuals (a fairly new term) could unite and combat. Without this spark, this rallying movement would not have begun and Dreyfus's acquittal might not have occurred.

The two opposing sides were now clearly defined. The morals, objectives, and unifying themes of each side became clear, allowing the two camps to recognize each other and themselves.

This surge in popularity of the Affair itself and the Dreyfusards, in conjunction with the actual publication of "J'Accuse" and Zola's trial, spread the debate of revision and was met by fiery opposition in all corners of French society. Heated arguments erupted in parliament as riots spread throughout Paris. A spurt of anti-Semitic violence seized France as well anti-Zola and anti-Dreyfusard demonstrations. The effects were immediate and widespread.

A day later, on January 13, the bomb that was Zola's J'accuse detonated and sent shock waves through Paris and the provinces...(Birnbaum 9-12)

...the affair now exploded ...It reached into the halls of academe, aristocratic salons, and the market places of Algeria... (Burns 106)

The first wave of incidents broke out the day after Zola launched his "bomb." On January 17 in Nantes, 3,000 youths paraded through the streets shouting cries of death. Windows of Jewish storefronts were shattered, and an attempt was made to force open the synagogue door... [chanting] "Death to the Jews!", "Death to Zola!", and "Death to Dreyfus!"... There were similar scenes in Moulins, Montpellier, Angouleme, Tours Poitiers, and Toulouse. (Bredin 285-86)

The anti-Dreyfusards began to worry. Not only were influential scholars and intellectuals joining the ranks of the Dreyfusards, but they had an audience and they were exerting a certain amount of influence over public opinion. Anti-Dreyfusards began organizing; forming The "Ligue de la Patrie Francaise", to counter the Dreyfusard organization entitled The League of the Rights of Man. The two factions were now combating publicly. Zola had polarized the intellectual world. New publications emerged on both sides, including *La Revue Blanche*, which was Dreyfusard and *La Patrie Francaise* which was anti-Dreyfusard. These passionate debates and division within the literary and intellectual world brought the debate to a national level and spilled over into politics, exerting a certain amount of influence there as well.

It was the logic of the world of letters, which created this new division, redrawing the contours of the right and the left...(Bredin 285)

However, the main victory of the Dreyfusards did not lie in the publication of "J'Accuse" itself, but strangely in Zola's trial and conviction. It was a "grandiose and dramatic spectacle" (Bredin 260), involving all the key members from both sides of the spectrum. The trial drew large crowds of people to the court house. Most importantly, the accusations made in Zola's article for which he was on trial, made it possible for the defense to reintroduce evidence that could help disprove Dreyfus' guilt, present the Affair to the public once again in a cohesive manner, and bring the army to trial. Key

members involved in manhandling Dreyfus' Trial, such as Colonel Henry, General Mercier, Esterhazy, Col. Paty Du Clam and the hand writing expert (whose testimony helped connect Dreyfus to the Bordereau), testified.

The defense was gaining a clear advantage as the witnesses called to the stand would frequently refuse to answer questions or pretend to be sick. Often, witnesses would not answer questions invoking the right of *raison d'état*, national security, or *res judicata*, the authority of prior verdict. The handwriting expert, Alphonse Bertillon, entertained the court for hours as he elaborated on a theory as to how the Bordereau was Dreyfus' work, while Esterhazy refused to answer many questions. The General Staff was losing credibility, as the jurors and "spectators" began seeing through their fragile defense.

Colonel Picquart's testimony was the first major breakthrough of the trial for the Dreyfusards. His testimony was of such quality and effectiveness that it was met with an ovation and a "Long live Picquart", which essentially meant, "Down with the Army." In a moment of passion, General de Pellieux decided to reveal all; bringing into action several documents doctored by Henry in order to quell any doubts about Dreyfus' guilt. However, he had not thought of the repercussions of his actions or was unaware that the documents he cited were indeed false. Leblois, Zola's lawyer, astutely requested that these documents be entered as evidence. The General Staff foresaw disaster and quickly covered it up by proclaiming that the documents mentioned could disrupt national security. Although defeat was temporarily averted and Zola was convicted and fled to England, the documents necessary to implicate the General Staff had been acknowledged. Therefore, the Dreyfusards had made an important step forward, bringing them ever closer to Dreyfus' acquittal. Soon after Henry's forgery would be discovered, he would

be imprisoned and later commit suicide. The League of the Rights of Man would continue to press for a retrial, until a date was set for a retrial on August 7<sup>th</sup> 1899. Although Dreyfus would be found guilty yet another time, he would be pardoned a week later, and only acquitted in 1906. This occurred because the public was very informed on the Dreyfus case and therefore the government could no longer cover up the military's errors.

As one can see, "J'Accuse" played an extraordinarily important role in the Dreyfus Affair. The repercussions and effects of the trial along with the text itself were invaluable to the Dreyfusard cause. Up until the publication of J'Accuse, the Dreyfusards were progressing at a frustratingly slow pace, often going backwards. The text set in motion a series of events that eroded the confidence and reliability of the General Staff, and ultimately led to Dreyfus' acquittal. The anti-Dreyfusards fought very passionately and roughly because the very reputation of the army and the republic was at stake. Their illegal misdealings had the opposite effect of casting a shadow over France and her politicians. This period of history marked a very dark and dangerous one for France. The nation as a whole was placed before the individual (as seen in single party fascist states). The progression of the Dreyfus Affair, although complicated by many details and "characters", is very linear. One event leads to the next, proceeding in a logical manner. Emile Zola's involvement, followed by his publication of J'Accuse and trial, directly influenced the course of the Affair. Without his involvement, without the publication of "J'accuse", Dreyfus would have surely died on Devil's Island.



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