

History Topic of the Month

The Dreyfus Affair

How would you feel if you were wrongly accused of something, and a court found you guilty? What if the entire justice system was so determined to find you guilty, it ignored all the evidence? Imagine if your guilt was decided not because of what you had *done*, but because of who you *were*.

In 1894 this happened to a French Army officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Dreyfus was accused of being a spy, arrested, tried, and sent to prison. Dreyfus was innocent – but to many of his accusers the most important piece of evidence was that Dreyfus was Jewish. Nothing changed when the real spy was found: to many in France, Dreyfus was just another Jew who could not be trusted.

This miscarriage of justice became one of the most infamous examples of anti-Semitism in history – and the campaign to clear Dreyfus' name would last over ten years.



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Captain Alfred Dreyfus

Who was Alfred Dreyfus?

In 1870 Germany had conquered Alsace-Lorraine, where Dreyfus had been born, from the French. Aged 10, Alfred Dreyfus fled to Paris with his family. The experience of losing his home to the Germans made Dreyfus choose a career in the army. In 1891 he became the only Jewish officer in French Army headquarters.

The French Army in 1894

Losing the war against Germany, made the French Army paranoid about Germany and very nationalistic. It was conservative and many army officers were suspicious about Jews, believing Jewish people were not loyal to France. Throughout France, anti-Semitism was increasing, with some newspapers regularly attacking Jews.

Dreyfus' commanding officers often praised his intelligence but were critical of his 'personality'. Other Jewish officers got similar reports, and anti-Semitic officers used this to deny them promotions.

A Spy in the French Army

The French Military Intelligence Service had recruited a housekeeper in the German embassy. In September 1894, she passed them a torn-up piece of paper (later called "the bordereau") she had found in an embassy bin. This was a letter from an officer in the French Army about passing top-secret artillery blueprints to the Germans.

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The army launched an investigation to catch the spy. They assumed the spy worked at Army Headquarters with knowledge of artillery – this meant they only investigated a very small number of people.

They quickly decided Dreyfus was the spy. Not only was he from an area that was now part of Germany, he was also a Jew. The reports that criticised his 'personality' were also used as evidence.

Handwriting and arrest

One of the investigators, Major Du Paty de Clam, claimed to be an expert on handwriting. He decided Dreyfus' handwriting matched the bordereau – despite several obvious differences. When an actual handwriting expert disagreed with him, the expert was sacked and replaced by someone who agreed.

On 15 October 1894 Dreyfus was sent to the Defence Ministry and ordered to write out a letter based on the bordereau. After writing it, he was arrested by Major Du Paty. Dreyfus was not told what his crime was – but that did not stop Du Paty offering him a revolver to kill himself and save his honour. The army also knew a dead man could not defend himself. Dreyfus refused, saying he would prove his innocence.

Dreyfus is put on trial

Dreyfus was placed in solitary confinement and questioned every day. The army leaked the story to the press. Some papers launched a campaign against Dreyfus, accusing him of being a Jewish traitor.

The case against Dreyfus was based on Du Paty arguing his handwriting was similar to the bordereau, his poor personality reports and his "knowledge of German." The lack of any real evidence was also used against Dreyfus because the army argued it was proof he must have destroyed it.

Dreyfus was tried before a military court on 19 December 1894. Dreyfus' lawyer called witnesses who demonstrated it was impossible for Dreyfus to have written the bordereau. He also demonstrated that the handwriting in the bordereau was not Dreyfus's.

The army handed a secret dossier to the judges that was not shown to the defence. Dreyfus was found guilty.



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Devil's Island in French Guiana where Dreyfus was imprisoned.

Dreyfus in prison

Dreyfus was found guilty of treason, sacked from the army and was sent to a prison on Devil's Island in French Guiana. Apart from his guards, no one else lived on the island.

Dreyfus was not allowed to see his family and all his letters to them were censored. He was often handcuffed to his bed and was frequently sick with fever.

The French Army falsely claimed Dreyfus had confessed. This was reported in the press. Many in France demanded Dreyfus be executed. Dreyfus' brother, Mathieu, started a campaign to clear his brother's name.

Finding the real spy

In July 1895 Major Georges Picquart started working for the French Military Intelligence Service. In March 1896 he intercepted a telegram from the same German officer who had received the bordereau, addressed to a French officer called Major Esterhazy.

Picquart investigated Esterhazy – and found his handwriting was identical to the bordereau. Picquart discovered Esterhazy had been selling French secrets to the Germans for years. Picquart now knew Dreyfus was innocent and that he had found the real spy.

Picquart reported his findings to the army. But, to his horror, the army refused to admit it had made a mistake. Picquart's deputy, Major Henry, was a friend of Esterhazy's and he forged a letter "proving" Dreyfus' guilt. Rather than investigate Esterhazy the army investigated Picquart. They accused him of being part of a Jewish conspiracy to free Dreyfus and destroy the French Army.



Contributor: © Black Sea Images / Alamy Stock Photo

The prison building on Devil's Island in French Guiana.



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Esterhazy is cleared

The news of Esterhazy leaked to the public. Esterhazy publicly argued his innocence. Mathieu Dreyfus argued that it was clear his brother was innocent. An anti-Semitic campaign in some newspapers claimed Esterhazy was the victim of a Jewish conspiracy.

The army put together a quick trial in January 1898. Using Major Henry's forged letter, they cleared Esterhazy completely and condemned Major Picquart. This was despite Dreyfus' supporters producing letters from Esterhazy where he wrote about his hatred of France.

The army was willing to protect a spy who hated their country, rather than admit they had imprisoned an innocent man. An innocent man who had only been accused because he was a Jew.

Enter Émile Zola

One of the defenders of Dreyfus was Émile Zola, the most famous novelist in France at that time. Three days after Esterhazy's trial, Zola wrote a famous article called *J'Accuse...* in one of France's leading newspapers. This article claimed the army had conspired to convict Dreyfus knowing he was innocent. The newspaper normally sold 30,000 copies of each issue – this copy sold 300,000.



Zola's aim was to be arrested for libel against the army. He wanted a public trial to get the facts out into the open. The government gave him what he wanted.

Zola's trial took place in February 1898. His lawyer was prevented from calling many witnesses, and from asking questions of the many army officers who gave evidence against Zola. Although Zola was convicted and fined, a lot of public sympathy switched from the army to Dreyfus.

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Cover of the French newspaper 'Le Petit Journal' illustrating the Esterhazy versus Picquart trial.

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Pressure builds

The trials of Esterhazy, Picquart and Zola changed everything. France, which prided itself on its history of equal rights, looked like a country where justice did not exist. Many French people were outraged at their government, and uncomfortable about the anti-Semitic campaign against Dreyfus.

In April 1898 Major Henry confessed he had forged the letter that “proved” Dreyfus’ guilt – Henry was arrested and committed suicide. Still the army refused to give Dreyfus a re-trial. Anti-Semite newspapers called Major Henry a martyr. The scandal spread. There were public clashes between the two sides. The French government collapsed. More and more evidence proved Esterhazy had written the bordereau not Dreyfus. Several lawyers argued that Dreyfus should be re-tried.

Dreyfus re-tried

On Devil’s Island, Dreyfus had no idea all this was happening. It was only at the end of 1898 that he discovered the public campaign to save him – and that Esterhazy was the real spy.

In June 1899, the French Supreme Court reviewed all the evidence and overturned the judgement of the military court. But only the army could announce Dreyfus was innocent – which they refused to do.

Dreyfus returned to France – but was immediately arrested. In August 1899, a second military trial of Dreyfus took place. There was no real evidence against him: Esterhazy even wrote to confess he had written the bordereau. Astonishingly Dreyfus was found guilty of treason *again*. The next day Dreyfus was offered freedom if he agreed to accept his ‘guilt’ – exhausted he agreed. A law was passed preventing any further legal action against anyone involved.

Dreyfus finally cleared

In 1902 a new socialist government was elected and denounced the treatment of Dreyfus. Another long review into the matter would last two more years. In March 1905, the French Attorney-General demanded Dreyfus’ conviction be wiped. In July 1906 Dreyfus was finally pardoned.

That month Dreyfus re-joined the army – and was given the rank of major. He retired a year later, though he later served France during the First World War as did his son.

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The impact of the affair

For almost ten years the Dreyfus Affair seemed to dominate French politics and society. It split families and communities. It raised all sorts of uncomfortable questions about attitudes in French society.

On one side was the army and its supporters. They believed any suggestion that the French Army had made a mistake could destroy the country.

On the other side were the supporters of Dreyfus – appalled at the persecution of Dreyfus and the anti-Semitism that had led to the army deciding he must be guilty.

The Dreyfus Affair is today still one of the most famous examples of anti-Semitic persecution in history. It showed how prejudice and suspicion could so affect people's judgement, that they would work with the spy they were trying to catch to protect themselves. It shows all of us how easy it is for any one of us to fall victim of injustice.

Discussion points

- What else can you find out about the war the French and Germans fought in 1870? Why do you think losing this war made the French Army so hostile against the Germans?
- In army reports Dreyfus, like other Jewish officers, was accused of having a bad 'personality'. How much do you think anti-Semitism affected the actions of the army?
- Why do you think the army was so unwilling to accept that it had made a mistake in arresting Dreyfus?
- Devil's Island is a remote prison, where Dreyfus was kept almost completely alone for five years. Try to imagine what sort of impact this isolation and suffering might have had on Dreyfus. How different do you think you would feel after living like that for years?
- Even though he was innocent, Dreyfus agreed to accept his guilt so he could avoid going back to prison in 1899. Why do you think he did this?
- Émile Zola was one of the most famous writers of the day. How much impact do you think having someone like him coming out in support of Dreyfus had? What else can you find out about Zola?
- What can you find out about what happened to Major Esterhazy, the man who was guilty?

About the author

Alistair Nunn is a Senior Product Manager at Pearson and has a degree in History.

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Reading List



Books

The Dreyfus Affair – by Piers Paul Read

The Man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France – Ruth Harris

An Officer and a Spy – Robert Harris (an excellent novel on the Dreyfus affair)



Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.

Articles



[What was the Dreyfus Affair](#)

[Dreyfus Was Vindicated, but What of the French?](#)