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| The Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906) |
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| The Dreyfus Affair was a French political controversy resulting from the unjust conviction and imprisonment of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer, for alleged espionage. By 1899, the “Affair” had polarized France between “Dreyfusards” and “anti-Dreyfusards,” pointing to profound divisions between traditionalist and modernizing forces.  In September 1894, the French War Ministry acquired a document called the *bordereau*, a memo offering a variety of military secrets to Germany. Dreyfus fell under suspicion because he had recently rotated through a variety of departments, received an unfavorable performance review, and, as a German-speaking Jew from Alsace, aroused the prejudices of his accusers. Despite bewildered protests of innocence, Dreyfus was imprisoned, court-martialed, publically stripped of his insignia and sabre, and shipped to Devil’s Island, where he would remain in solitary confinement for the next four-and-a-half years. The press leaked his name before his trial and vicious anti-Semitic rhetoric erupted across France. |
| The Dreyfus Affair was a French political controversy resulting from the unjust conviction and imprisonment of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer, for alleged espionage. By 1899, the “Affair” had polarized France between “Dreyfusards” and “anti-Dreyfusards,” pointing to profound divisions between traditionalist and modernizing forces.  In September 1894, the French War Ministry acquired a document called the *bordereau*, a memo offering a variety of military secrets to Germany. Dreyfus fell under suspicion because he had recently rotated through a variety of departments, received an unfavorable performance review, and, as a German-speaking Jew from Alsace, aroused the prejudices of his accusers. Despite bewildered protests of innocence, Dreyfus was imprisoned, court-martialed, publically stripped of his insignia and sabre, and shipped to Devil’s Island, where he would remain in solitary confinement for the next four-and-a-half years. The press leaked his name before his trial and vicious anti-Semitic rhetoric erupted across France.  However, suspicions of Dreyfus’s innocence remained. In summer 1896, a new head of the Intelligence Services, Georges Picquart, received a second document and identified a different man (Esterhazy) as its source. Reviewing Dreyfus’s file, Picquart realized that Esterhazy’s handwriting matched the *bordereau*’s and that Dreyfus must be innocent. Picquart, however, encountered fierce resistance to the exoneration of Dreyfus. Forged documents were added to Dreyfus’s secret file, and Picquart himself was threatened, dismissed from the military, and imprisoned.  Picquart’s lawyer then took the evidence to politicians and to the novelist Émile Zola, who in January 1898 published a famous open letter to President Faure. Denouncing the Dreyfus Affair as a stain on the French state, Zola’s letter ran under the giant headline “J’ACCUSE…!” and denounced many of the key figures by name. His subsequent trial for libel brought additional attention to the case.  In 1899, Dreyfus returned to France, was inexplicably convicted in a second court-martial, pardoned, and finally rehabilitated in 1906. He served his country with distinction in WWI and lived until 1935.  The Dreyfus Affair is important first of all as a notorious miscarriage of justice and as an example of the virulence of modern anti-Semitism. As evidence of Dreyfus’s innocence emerged, however, the affair also became a political struggle between traditionalists and progressives. Dreyfus’s supporters tended to be politicians in the Third Republic and anticlerical intellectuals, while the anti-Dreyfusards included the army hierarchy, monarchists, and many Catholics. The Dreyfus Affair thus revealed deep divisions and anxieties within French society. These anxieties included fears about German espionage, internal enemies, and French national identity. The Dreyfus Affair has been the object of study from a multitude of perspectives, such as the origins of counter-intelligence, the ability of the press both to stir up hatred and to uncover abuses of power, anti-Semitism and secularism in French society, potential abuses of secret evidence, and the importance of whistleblowers like Picquart and Zola. |
| Further reading:  (UGA Law Alfred Dreyfus Information Site) |