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The Antisemitic Riots of 1898 in France

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Abstract

Historians are only just beginning to take the study of what Georges Sorel called 'la révolution dreyfusienne' beyond the courtroom and the newspaper, and thus, despite the volume of literature devoted to 'the Affair', many of its main features as a socio-historical phenomenon have remained shrouded in the clouds of metaphysical drama. A prime example of this conspiracy of silence is provided by the antisemitic riots of 1898. The historian Jules Isaac, himself the son of a Jewish army officer like Dreyfus, had reason to remember that year when, he recollected in old age, '...la France semblait revenue au temps des guerres de religion; la possibilité d'une nouvelle Saint-Barthélemy - contre les Juifs et Protestants, bon gré mal gré associés dans la tourmente - n'était pas exclue'. However, if one turns to general histories of the period and of 'the Affair', one finds little or no mention of what was the main popular movement of the time in this direction, indeed the high-point of active popular involvement, in the whole Dreyfus Affair: the riots of January and February 1898. From the administrative and police reports it is possible to redress the balance, and to establish how serious and how widespread these riots really were, and to place them in the wider perspective, not only of French antisemitism, but also of popular émeutes in general in nineteenth-century France. First it will be necessary to analyse the riots themselves in some detail

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