

The Dreyfus Affair 1894–1906



Captain Alfred Dreyfus was the first French Jewish officer at General Staff Headquarters and was from the Alsace region of France. The French military had a number of anti-Semitic officers who disapproved of a Jew on the general staff. In 1894, Marie Bastian, a cleaning lady at the German Embassy, found a scrap of paper in a wastebasket. It was a *bordereau*—an outline—of French military movement signed with the letter *D*. The French counterintelligence began the search for the traitor in the Army and settled on the Jewish Captain Dreyfus.

At the first court-martial, the Army had a handwriting expert state that the handwriting of the *bordereau* matched that of Dreyfus. Dreyfus was convicted, stripped of his rank, and paraded out of camp in disgrace. The night before his disgrace, he took time to cut the threads on his uniform buttons, epaulettes, braids, sleeves and trouser strips so that the officer that removed them would not have any difficulty. He also filed his sword so that it would break easily when the office took it and broke it over the leg. Dreyfus was marched out and sent to Devil's Island. He yelled over the band "I am innocent! *Vive la France!*" The crowd yelled, "Death to the Jew!"

Then in 1896, Lt. Colonel Georges Picquart was assigned by the Army to prove beyond a doubt that Dreyfus was guilty. He discovered that the real traitor was Major Marie Charles Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy. Esterhazy denied the charge and demanded a trial. The French Army feared the public would lose confidence in the Army, and Esterhazy was acquitted in 1898 of the charges. Lt. Colonel Picquart was sent to overseas locations to remove him from the public eye.

After a serious accident, Picquart wrote a letter to his attorney and laid out his discovery of evidence in the case. Part of that evidence was that Major Hubert-Joseph Henry had fabricated evidence against Dreyfus. Major Henry was arrested and died in his jail cell under mysterious circumstances. It was ruled suicide by cutting his own throat.

The French public had divided into two groups: Dreyfusards, the supporters of Dreyfus; and anti-Dreyfusards. Georges Clemenceau coined the term *intellectual* to defend Emile Zola after he wrote "J'accuse," a published letter that attacked the French General Staff for their treatment of Dreyfus. Zola was tried for libel and convicted. He fled to England, and after his return to France, he died under unusual circumstances.

Dreyfus was given a new trial in 1899, and the French Army held part of the trial behind closed doors and found Dreyfus guilty once more. The government changed, and in 1906, Dreyfus was pardoned. He was given the rank of major and fought for France in the Great War, bearing the rank of lieutenant colonel. The French Army in 1995 declared Dreyfus innocent of treason. The debate is still an issue in France today.

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