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An Affair on Every Continent: French Reaction to the Foreign Press during the Dreyfus Affair

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AN AFFAIR ON EVERY CONTINENT:
FRENCH REACTION TO THE FOREIGN PRESS
DURING THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

David Murrell

On October 15, 1894, artillery captain Alfred Dreyfus was summoned to the French Ministry of War in Paris. At the time, the Jewish soldier, born in the northeastern French region of Alsace, thought nothing of the matter, believing he was merely due for his annual inspection. The only peculiarity was that he was specifically ordered to wear civilian clothing, but this seemed unimportant. Upon arriving at the ministry building, Lieutenant Colonel Charles du Paty de Clam met Dreyfus and asked the artillery captain to compose a letter on his behalf, citing a sore finger. Dreyfus obliged, still unaware that anything was amiss. It was only after he had finished the letter, when du Paty de Clam rose and announced emphatically, “In the name of the law, I arrest you; you are accused of the crime of high treason,”¹ that Dreyfus realized this was no ordinary inspection.

Such were the humble beginnings of what came to be known as the Dreyfus affair, an international scandal that wracked France, as well as the rest of the world, from 1894 until 1906. Specifically, Dreyfus had been accused of passing on French army secrets to the German military attaché in Paris, Maximilien von Schwartzkoppen. As evidence, senior officials on the French General Staff cited a document which would come to be known as the *bordereau*, an unsigned sheet of paper containing sensitive French military information that had been picked up by a French spy in Schwartzkoppen’s wastebasket at the German embassy. When du Paty de Clam summoned Dreyfus on that mid-October morning, his finger was not really injured. It was a trap, meant to prove that Dreyfus’s hand had written the incriminating document. The evi-

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dence was good enough for du Paty de Clam, for he immediately ordered Dreyfus's incarceration. Dreyfus was then convicted by a closed-door military tribunal in December 1894 and sent to Devil's Island, a penal colony off the coast of French Guiana, South America, notorious for its brutal conditions. With Dreyfus shipped halfway across the world and locked in a stone cabin measuring four square meters,² the story of a traitorous Jewish officer ought to have ended once and for all.

Without the mass press that was burgeoning throughout Europe and, indeed, much of the world, this might very well have been the case. The turn of the twentieth century, however, brought with it a newly powerful actor: the modern newspaper.



Illustration of Alfred Dreyfus's degradation ceremony
at the École Militaire

In France, the foundations for a literate, engaged citizenry were laid decades earlier with the adoption of the 1833 *Loi Guizot*, which established primary schools throughout the country and created a new base of readers in addition to the urban dwellers and educated classes.³ Not only were these new segments of society now capable of reading, but they also had access to a novel brand of popular press which, according to historian Christophe Charle, “abandoned the political function that dominated the press, instead choosing to distract and move the new readers, leading to the development of so-called tabloids.”⁴ With its diverse cast of characters, the Dreyfus affair served as fantastic tabloid fodder throughout Europe. Whether one was a “Dreyfusard” supporting the artillery captain, or an “anti-Dreyfusard” in favor of the guilty verdict, there was no shortage of heroes and villains to support.

The case itself had an inherently dramatic quality to it, for it soon became evident that a number of the documents used to convict Dreyfus in his first court-martial were forgeries created by members of the French military. Colonel Georges Picquart, one of Dreyfus’s earliest defenders in the military, also realized that the leaks to Schwartzkoppen had continued even after Dreyfus’s arrest, which led him to discover the real traitor, a soldier by the name of Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy. While the French military had no desire to reopen the Dreyfus case, even wrongly clearing Esterhazy of any wrongdoing in a court-martial, the press was now reporting on the various developments in the nascent affair with great zeal. This was in large part thanks to an article from a French newspaper, Georges Clemenceau’s *L’Aurore*, which helped spark serious international interest in the Dreyfus affair. That article was “J’accuse...!” celebrated French novelist Émile Zola’s seminal open letter to French President Félix Faure, published January 13, 1898. In “J’accuse,” Zola alleged that a massive conspiracy was being propagated by the French government and military to cover up Dreyfus’s innocence. In the aftermath of the article’s publication, it became clear that the

French government would not succeed in burying the Dreyfus case, for Zola had managed to transform it into a bona fide international scandal. Indeed, from 1898 onward, Zola's open letter polarized individual citizens within France, while also galvanizing support for Dreyfus throughout the world in the pages of the foreign press.

There would be many developments and revelations between January 1898 and August 1899, the month Dreyfus was recalled from Devil's Island for a second military tribunal in Rennes, France. But in some ways, Zola's "J'accuse," imposing such pressure upon the French government, fast-tracked the Dreyfus case straight to Rennes. Indeed, by this point, the Dreyfus affair had gripped France, as well as the rest of Europe. In one Belgian town, the entire community put on a parade in advance of the Rennes court-martial, complete with citizens dressed up as French officers and lawyers.⁵ It is conceivable that these Belgian townsfolk were not well-versed in the political and legal intricacies of the Dreyfus affair. But to them, these details did not matter. They were drawn to the characters and the theatrics of it all, as if the affair itself were a real-life play. This was the legacy of the popular press, which highlighted narrative and drama over the more burdensome legal and political details.

If the French government was concerned about the political and social ramifications of an incendiary article like Zola's, then it was equally troubled by the new international tenor of the affair. Admittedly, these fears proved to be quite rational. On the day of Dreyfus's reconviction at Rennes, demonstrations broke out in favor of the ex-captain around the world. From Egypt to Australia, and virtually everywhere in between, the message was the same: people were indignant that Dreyfus had been reconvicted, particularly given the revelations that many of the documents used to convict him had been fraudulent.⁶ The French consul in Melbourne, Australia, reported that the situation "could not be worse."⁷ In Belgium, the press was described as having a "rare violence."⁸ Tens of thousands demonstrated

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in favor of Dreyfus at Hyde Park in London, England.⁹ And in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a group of socialists signed a petition condemning the verdict, with the hope that their message could be transmitted to Dreyfus's lawyer, Fernand Labori.¹⁰

In 1899, nearly five years after Dreyfus's original conviction, the case inspired more controversy than ever before. It was ultimately the risk of a continued media fiasco that led French President Émile Loubet to offer Dreyfus a pardon, which the artillery captain accepted on September 19, 1899. This, however, did not bring about a calm denouement to the affair. Indeed, the Dreyfus affair was like a Hydra: when one controversy



Émile Zola's "J'accuse...!"

was settled, two more appeared in its place. Eventually, in 1904, Dreyfus's lawyer submitted a request on behalf of his client for a new appeal. After a slow march through the French courts, the Supreme Court of Appeal announced on July 12, 1906, that Alfred Dreyfus was innocent. The French Senate passed a bill to promote Dreyfus to the rank of major within the army. The following decade, Dreyfus would serve alongside his countrymen as an artillery officer in the First World War.

The foreign press played an instrumental role during the affair, familiarizing individuals across borders and continents with the plight of Dreyfus. These people then mobilized around the world, pressuring the French government to amend the verdict. Newspapers worldwide, some utilizing news agencies such as Reuters and others hiring their own foreign correspondents, reported detailed updates on the affair on a daily basis. The extent of the spread of information was impressive, even by today's standards. In 1898, for instance, the London *Times* republished a letter, originally sent to a newspaper in Vienna, Austria, which had been written by an American woman living in a small Finnish town.¹¹ The woman, describing the conditions in her village, reported, "People here are so frightfully interested in [the affair]. Even the peasants in quite out of the way places spoke about it to my husband on his last journey. The general opinion in this country is that Dreyfus is innocent."¹²

This sort of article, which did not condemn the French state or military, was relatively benign as far as the French government was concerned. But there were still many other stories written by the foreign press that directly attacked the French government's treatment of Dreyfus and, at least implicitly and occasionally explicitly, encouraged its readers to protest against France. Such demonstrations and discourse inevitably hurt France's reputation as a bastion of justice and equality, a position it had enjoyed since the French Revolution in 1789. This change in perception was a central concern of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which kept detailed reports from its consuls and

ambassadors abroad pertaining to the activities of the foreign press.

Of much greater concern to the ministry, however, was the publication of numerous articles, particularly in neighboring Britain, which subsequently trickled into France and served to reignite the debate surrounding Dreyfus. This phenomenon was especially prevalent during the years between Dreyfus's first conviction in 1894 and the publication of "J'accuse" in 1898, a period when the affair was by no means entrenched as an international scandal. Most famously, in 1896, Mathieu Dreyfus, the brother of Alfred, convinced the British *Daily Chronicle* to publish a false story proclaiming that his brother had escaped from Devil's Island.¹³ Mathieu hoped this would keep his brother's name in the press and provide a reminder that the Dreyfus affair had not yet concluded. Ultimately, Mathieu's gamble paid dividends as a number of British papers picked up the story, prompting the French press to follow suit and thus keeping the Dreyfus scandal in the public consciousness in France.

Given this volatile atmosphere, it should come as no surprise that the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs sought to keep close tabs on the foreign media in order to control any discourse pertaining to Dreyfus. This desire to control information abroad led the French government to pursue attempts at censorship more broadly than it ever did with its own domestic press. Although the French certainly spied on their own newspapers and reporters, the government never moved to prevent the publication of a domestic news story. This was due to the Press Law of 1881, which effectively guaranteed newspapers the freedom to print whatever they pleased. The French treatment of the foreign press, on the other hand, was a different story, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs repeatedly attempted to intervene through diplomatic channels in order to limit the publication of damning materials against the French state. Unfortunately for the French government, many of the foreign countries that covered the affair most aggressively (particularly Belgium, Britain, Germany,

and Switzerland) either had their own liberalized press laws or had no incentive to restrict the publication of articles that were hostile to France. For these reasons, the French focused their censorship efforts, particularly within Europe, on theater productions, which were not yet granted similar freedoms from government censors. Even on the few occasions when France did move to influence the press outside of Europe, the country's efforts were generally unsuccessful.

Relative to the rest of the world, the European press received the vast majority of attention from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This was expected, for Europeans were much closer to France geographically and thus more familiar with the country's history and culture. Naturally, this geographic proximity enabled the European press to locate more sources and invest more in breaking stories over the course of the entire affair, as opposed to covering only crucial events such as the Rennes court-martial. The shared cultural and historical understanding among Europeans was a primary reason the French government was so concerned with European press coverage. Indeed, much of the affair was couched in terms that were intra-European in nature, making it relevant to the entire continent. When the coverage was critical of France, as it almost always was, this constituted a political threat. For instance, after the British *Daily Mail* coined the term in September 1899, much of the European press began referring to the Dreyfus affair as France's "moral Sedan," connecting the scandal to France's humiliating military defeat at the Battle of Sedan in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Moreover, the European press had an incentive to market the affair in a way that appealed to Europeans on a broader level. In doing so, the press created a continent-wide scandal, involving various players from France, Germany, and Italy alike. It became impossible for Europeans not to link the infiltration of Maximilien von

Schwartzkoppen, the German spy to whom Dreyfus allegedly sold military secrets, to the French military and its involvement in the Franco-Prussian War. Similarly, the Dreyfusard European press could not help but frame the ex-captain's convictions as a repudiation of the gains of the French Revolution. In this regard, Europe was better equipped to cover the affair with vitriol and acumen than any other part of the world.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs devoted immense resources to tracking the activities of this international press. The department's minister, Gabriel Hanotaux, received daily updates from his consular and ambassadorial staff on the day's foreign news. These dispatches took many different forms: press clippings of specific articles, hand-written translations, and detailed syntheses describing the coverage of numerous papers. In the early days of the affair, it was not a foregone conclusion that the foreign press would become obsessed with covering the case of Alfred Dreyfus. For instance, on November 6, 1897, the French ambassador to Germany wrote to Hanotaux, "the Affair in question offers no direct interest for the German government."¹⁴ The sentiment was echoed by the German press, and one German newspaper, *La Gazette de la Croix*, mentioned, "This whole question is for France an internal affair, of which we in Germany do not need to exaggerate the significance."¹⁵

This detachment disappeared in a matter of weeks, following allegations in the French press that the German kaiser himself dealt with Dreyfus and coordinated his espionage. Such an assertion transformed the Dreyfus affair in the eyes of the German populace from an entirely French scandal into a calumny that attacked the honor and reputation of Germany. In other words, the affair became something of a geopolitical conflict. As the French ambassador to Germany later described, "As a result of all this, the German newspapers have modified their original attitude and no longer publish exclusively news articles about the affair."¹⁶ Indeed, *La Gazette de la Croix*, which had downplayed the affair's significance weeks earlier, now termed it France's

“military Panama,” referring to the bribery scandal over the Panama Canal that walloped the French government in 1892. If this anti-French sentiment was only burgeoning in Germany by the end of November, it no doubt crystallized the following month. On December 12, 1897, Henri de Rochefort published an even more accusatory article in his popular newspaper *L’Intransigeant*, further implicating German Kaiser Wilhelm II.¹⁷

This budding conflict with Germany was certainly troubling for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The French ambassador to Germany continued to provide numerous updates on the “biased and Francophobic” writings in German newspapers, such as those by the Paris correspondent of the *Berliner Tageblatt*.¹⁸ Germany was expected to cover the basic facts of the affair, but this transition to aggressive anti-French opinion pieces did not bode well for Franco-German relations. Indeed, only two decades earlier, France had lost the mineral-rich territory of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany. The relationship between the two European powers, therefore, was already tense. And for a country that wished to appear strong in the aftermath of such a devastating military defeat, the Dreyfus affair seemed to do just the opposite for France, reflecting the image of a nation in decline for all to see. In the context of Franco-German relations, these small changes in public perception had tangible diplomatic consequences.

Although no British diplomats were implicated in the Dreyfus affair, much of the British press coverage has been understood by historians in similar geopolitical terms. As historian Ricky Lee Sherrod argues, British interest in the affair stemmed in part from fear over the prospect of a diminishing role of liberalism—particularly as it pertained to enlightened notions of justice, democracy, and laissez-faire economics—in the coming twentieth century. The recently unified German *Kaiserreich* seemed to demonstrate that a state could achieve its desired ends through means that were decidedly illiberal, and the Dreyfus affair signaled that perhaps France was journeying down a

similar path. Thus, as Sherrod writes, British reportage of the affair reflected “a subliminal sense of national insecurity,” which highlighted “an intense concern about the future of liberalism and the declining popularity of liberal values in both Britain and Europe.”¹⁹ As one magazine in Edinburgh noted, “If what is now springing up rankly in France is germinating throughout the world, then the beginning of a new century may be a rude one, a terrible shaking, the end of which no human foresight can predict.”²⁰ But if the British media were concerned about the future of European liberalism, then the Dreyfus affair offered a rare opportunity for Britain to assume the mantle as the “true world leader and principal promoter of civilization and progressive ways. The Affair demonstrated the fragility of French claims in these respects.”²¹ This widespread sense of disappointment with the apparent French descent into injustice and illiberalism was not only felt across the English Channel. In 1898, the French consul in Antwerp, Belgium, recorded a conversation in which a local dignitary in the Masonic Lodge said, “If a war broke out between France and Germany, all of the people would be happy to hear of the defeat of the [French] ‘Grand Nation,’ which has abdicated the ideas of justice and humanity of which she has been the guardian since 1789.”²²

Historian Ronald K. Huch identifies a British press that was quite brazen in its geopolitical motivations for covering the Dreyfus affair. Huch notes that there were protests throughout Britain after Dreyfus’s second conviction at Rennes, but the moment Dreyfus was pardoned, the country seemed to lose any sense of outrage regarding the affair. Thus, while a small number of British citizens continued their noble fight and claimed that a pardon was still unjust, most of the population felt as though their task had been completed. Huch argues that this reaction was no surprise, writing, “In England, the reaction to the Rennes trial had always been more anti-French than pro-Dreyfus.”²³ In other words, the British had used the affair as a means of criticizing the French, stoking the centuries-old rivalry between the two

countries. The moment France realized the folly of its ways and pardoned Dreyfus, however, the British no longer had anything to gain from attacking the French. Put simply, the fate of Dreyfus himself was irrelevant.

The aforementioned “J’accuse” was unquestionably the spark that ignited much of the rhetoric surrounding the Dreyfus affair around the globe. This rhetoric had tangible consequences for French citizens living abroad. Indeed, in one February 1898 report sent to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Rotterdam consul in the Netherlands warned that “business with our country is suffering from the current crisis. A certain number of travelling French commerce agents have been recently recalled by their firms because they have not been able to conduct any business.”²⁴ Reports such as this one solidified the belief within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the spread of anti-French commentary across Europe had to be halted.

In Amsterdam, the French consul general reported that many of Zola’s pamphlets had been translated into Dutch and were now appearing in the windows of libraries across the city.²⁵ Equally concerning to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the fact that two pro-Dreyfus French newspapers, *Le Siècle* and *L’Aurore*, were beginning to emerge on the shelves of small boutiques in the Netherlands. The Amsterdam consul concluded that, since these newspapers were not being sold in the official kiosks that had a monopoly on the sale of foreign newspapers, they must have been coming directly from Paris as a propaganda tool to sow anti-French discord.²⁶ Hanotaux found this development so troubling that he forwarded the consul general’s message to his superior, Prime Minister Jules Méline, and to his colleague in the French cabinet, Minister of War Jean-Baptiste Billot. The subtext in Hanotaux’s action is clear: the French government may not have been able to censor *Le Siècle* or *L’Aurore* within its own borders, but it certainly could attempt to prevent the illegal smuggling of these Dreyfusard papers throughout Europe.

In attempting to control the foreign press’s access to

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French newspapers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reached out to diplomats in neighboring countries. Only three days after Hanotaux received the news from his consul in Amsterdam, the Ministry of the Interior sent him a separate message, asking Hanotaux to telegraph his German counterpart to see if *L'Aurore* was sold there too.²⁷ The French suspected that the newspaper had made its way to Germany either through Belgium or the Netherlands. Still, there is no evidence that the French government solicited the Germans to ban the sale of *L'Aurore*. Rather, it is likely that the French were attempting to uncover the extent of the smuggling of the newspapers, which they could then address internally by preventing them from ever leaving France illegally in the first place.



Members of the foreign press at the 1899 Rennes court-martial.
From *Cinq semaines à Rennes, deux cents photographies de Gerschel*
(Paris, France: F. Juven, 1900).

Although the French government had to exercise some degree of caution in controlling the press abroad, it felt much more freedom in pursuing censorship of the arts, particularly the theater. Even France itself, which had almost fully liberalized its press laws in 1881, did not end censorship of the theater until 1906. This was in part because in the mid-nineteenth century, the theater was considered even more influential than the press, as it was one of the only ways through which the illiterate masses could be exposed to political caricature and criticism of the ruling elites.²⁸ However, as the century progressed and the masses became more literate, the printed word surpassed plays as a more powerful medium for influencing public opinion. Nevertheless, the French government remained invested in censorship of theatrical productions sympathetic to Dreyfus. In particular, the production of a play entitled “Dreyfus, or the Martyr of Devil’s Island,” which quickly spread across Europe, preoccupied the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France. In a letter dated January 17, 1898, French diplomats in Belgium first notified Minister Hanotaux about the play’s existence. Hanotaux and the French consul of Antwerp then worked together to find a way to outlaw the performance altogether.²⁹ Despite their efforts, the play’s popularity persisted and performances were carried out on a regular basis in countries such as Italy and the Netherlands. Although the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the cooperation of the Italian government, was able to suppress a production of the play being staged in San Remo, Italy, Dreyfus’s mass appeal rendered the play too difficult to suppress entirely. Indeed, not long after receiving the positive news regarding San Remo, Hanotaux confided to his consul in Amsterdam, “Are these performances still going on? I can only regret that they haven’t been forbidden like they were in The Hague.”³⁰

French efforts to suppress theater productions brought mixed results. On the one hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

did enforce the interdiction of some performances, particularly in countries that maintained strong and beneficial diplomatic relations with France. Unlike major European powers such as Britain or Germany, smaller European states understood that there was little to gain from consistently tarnishing France's world standing. As a result, these smaller countries were more sympathetic to France's plight. As one Italian newspaper proclaimed, "We love France and we wish her only the best: we hope she stays in Europe as a leader of civilization rather than of barbarism."³¹ These smaller European states were perhaps also wary that a similar scandal could befall them one day in this new mass media environment—they understood that by helping France now during this time of need, they could rely upon the country to return the favor at a later date.

Even for those European governments that did sympathize with France, enacting censorship necessitated a calculation between the benefit of helping France versus the social cost of enacting overly harsh suppression. In Amsterdam, for example, the French were unable to convince Dutch diplomats to ban the production of "Devil's Island." On January 26, 1898, the Amsterdam consul general broke the news to Hanotaux, writing, "A prohibition would only create in the press an ardent polemic; the legality and the opportunity would be contested...It would be a redoubling of commotion, extra publicity from which only those amateurs seeking scandal would benefit."³² This must have come as a disappointment to Minister Hanotaux, but the failure illustrates the complicated position occupied by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs when it came to the coverage of the Dreyfus affair abroad. Although the press was much more of a threat to public opinion given its ability to reach and affect more people, it was nearly impossible to censor the scandal through diplomatic channels due to the widespread freedom of the press laws in Europe. All that was left to censor, then, were the cheap and often poorly attended "Boulevard theater" productions, such as "The Captain Dreyfus," which was staged in Hamburg, Germany, in

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February 1898. According to one Frenchman who attended the play on behalf of the French consul, the spectacle was terrible. “Poorly directed and without any artistic value,” he wrote, “there were at least as many whistles as there was applause.”³³



An advertisement for an American play based on the 1899 work *Devil's Island: A Novel founded upon the famous Dreyfus case*. Though there is no evidence the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs ever sought to censor this particular production, plays such as this one were often the targets of censorship efforts led by the ministry.

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The French efforts to censor negative press in the arts constitute an early form of so-called “cultural diplomacy.”³⁴ This was, of course, unlike the cultural diplomacy of the Cold War, where cultural products were sent from the United States to the Soviet Union, and vice versa, in an effort to establish some degree of understanding between the two enemy powers. Instead, in the French context, cultural diplomacy was a strategy implemented as a means of shaping the cultural realm of foreign countries in a way that was beneficial to French interests. Such efforts at cultural diplomacy were not deployed solely by the French. After the Rennes retrial and the decision to convict Dreyfus, masses across Europe petitioned their respective governments to use cultural events to punish France. This took the form of calls to boycott the 1900 World’s Fair, which was to be held in Paris. These demands began as early as 1898, albeit more quietly. One German newspaper first made the suggestion after Zola was convicted for libel following the publication of “J’accuse.”³⁵ The French took these concerns seriously, for the World’s Fair was anticipated to be not only an economic boon for France, but also an opportunity to celebrate the country’s history and glory as one of the great states of Europe. Any boycott would have been a serious blow both to finance and national pride. In September 1899, the French consul at Hamburg alerted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about a German news article that suggested a boycott and also noted that “many very important American businesses have made the decision to send nothing to the Exposition if the situation does not improve, and the business world in England is set to follow this example as well.”³⁶ As Michael Burns notes in his historical study of the 1900 World’s Fair and the Dreyfus pardon, the risk of losing the international festival played a significant role in pressuring the French government to pardon Dreyfus following the Rennes verdict. As Burns asserts,

[Prime Minister Pierre] Waldeck-Rousseau’s gov-

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ernment quickly realized that a pardon would serve many purposes: it would eliminate the very real possibility of the prisoner's death while in custody...The pardon would also serve to liberate Dreyfus without exonerating him (and thereby pacify many factions in France); and it would salvage the 1900 Exposition by calming international protest.³⁷

Although the threats to boycott never derived from individual governments, the international community nevertheless exercised its own sort of pressure on France, much like France did in its suppression of foreign theater productions through cultural diplomacy.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the French made little if any effort to engage with or amend the portrayal of Alfred Dreyfus in the United States. Perhaps in that country, where freedom of speech was so deeply ingrained in the fabric of society, the French recognized that any requests for censorship would either not be accepted or not be upheld. That is not to say, however, that the French ignored American coverage of the Dreyfus affair altogether. And there was indeed tremendous coverage of the scandal in the United States, which continued to crest leading up to and during the 1899 Rennes trial. As Egal Feldman, a scholar of Jewish American history, records in his book *The Dreyfus Affair and the American Conscience*, for a country “aspiring to play a meaningful, if not heroic, role in the world, it was only natural that the attention of Americans would be attracted to major political and social crises abroad.”³⁸ Much of the affair was transmitted to the United States through British media outlets—only a few newspapers based out of major cities in the United States could afford their own foreign correspondents to

travel to France and report on the unfolding events there—and consequently, a significant portion of American coverage began to reflect certain British idiosyncrasies and perspectives. Most notably, this manifested into what Feldman terms an “Anglo-American bond” in judicial procedures.³⁹ A *New York Times* article from 1898 illustrates this tendency:

In France...there are no rules of evidence... Witnesses have appeared before the judges and have spoken their minds freely. They have not presented evidence. They have given their own opinions. They have expressed the opinions of others. They have repeated conversations that they have heard at second or third hand. All this is called testimony in Europe.⁴⁰

Much of this coverage can be interpreted as American self-congratulation. The not-so-subtle subtext in articles such as these was that Dreyfus’s conviction never could have occurred in a more civilized or democratic nation such as the United States, where judicial procedures and norms were much more rational. In this regard, American press coverage hardly differed from the self-aggrandizement that historian Ricky Lee Sherrod detected in his study of the British press.

On the other hand, the French judiciary undeniably tolerated a great deal of testimony that would have been impermissible in the United States. During the Rennes court-martial, for instance, former French Minister of War Auguste Mercier testified that German and British bankers had donated over thirty-five million francs to mysterious forces—frequently referred to in the anti-Semitic, anti-Dreyfusard press as the so-called “Jewish Syndicate”—who were working to exonerate Dreyfus.⁴¹ The French newspapers were left to rebut this claim, with one article in *Le Figaro* commenting, “Nothing is more unjust, nothing more slanderous, monstrous, however, than that accusation of Gen-

eral Mercier...It is an attempt to dishonor all those who fight for the triumph of the truth.”⁴² Thus, in France, newspapers played the role of quasi-arbiter, condemning false testimony when the judicial structure failed to do so. Still, to an American public unfamiliar with the intricacies of French legal customs, testimony like Mercier’s was laughable and undermined justice.

The French were well aware of the growing power of the United States, and this sometimes manifested itself as unreasonable paranoia about the influence of the American press. The most pronounced instance of such fears transpired in December 1897, when Minister Hanotaux sent a letter to the New York consul marked “very confidential,” inquiring into an alleged plot orchestrated by the New York newspaper the *World* to free Dreyfus from Devil’s Island:

An individual who calls himself Antoine de Bastillac, and who has collaborated at the *World* in New York, recently passed through Paris, stating that he had participated in a plot that was organized a few months ago in the United States by the Israelite director of the newspaper to remove Dreyfus; he assures that the project will soon be restarted and that an expedition will be organized in Louisiana to this end, under the pretext of a shipment of arms to Cuba. Do your best to provide me information on Bastillac and on what he alleges. If need be, consult with your colleague in New Orleans.⁴³

That the French believed such a complex scheme to be plausible speaks volumes about their perception of the American press. Indeed, the French were so concerned about the possibility of such a plot that they even contacted Spain to request that the Spanish provide any intelligence they might have procured pertaining to the alleged conspiracy. Such a plan never materialized

and was, of course, no more than an elaborate fiction. Yet the seriousness with which the French government processed and reacted to this warning reveals a deep-seated fear of the power of the American press.

If French government officials feared American newspaper influence, they also often expressed disdain for the negative coverage that so frequently emanated from the United States. The reports sent from the Chicago consul to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Rennes trial of 1899 were particularly indicative of this French sentiment, which contained a powerful mix of wounded pride and betrayal. In these letters, the Chicago consul compiled an impressive list of grievances against the United States. From criticism of the newspaper coverage itself, to jealousy over the country's privileged position in the world, to dissatisfaction with the hypocrisy of American society as a whole, these missives expressed in impassioned language the frustration felt by a proud Frenchman and diplomat serving his country in hostile isolation.

In one of the consul's earliest letters to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated August 24, 1899, the diplomat noted with contempt that every single newspaper in Chicago was supporting Dreyfus. This was compounded by the fact that, curiously, many pro-Dreyfus Frenchmen had been contributing articles to the American press, which had infused the local coverage with a heretofore unseen tenacity and proximity to the story. As the consul in Chicago observed, "Numerous French writers such as Bernard Lazare, Joseph Reinach, Marcel Prévost, and Clemenceau contribute regularly to this extraordinary service of the American press, which we can say has been unanimously favorable to the condemned of 1894."⁴⁴ He later continued, "All good Frenchmen abroad cannot rid themselves of an incommensurate sadness in the presence of exaggerated interference of the foreign press in a family affair."⁴⁵ Implied in these musings of the consul was the belief that the foreign press took an interest in the Dreyfus affair not for noble reasons of justice, but instead due to

a voyeuristic fascination with watching and analyzing what he believed to be a private “family affair.” Thus, it must have been disheartening for the diplomat to hear from an American journalist that “It is good style now to run down France; it makes money; it shows to France that there is something else than herself and behind her in the world.”⁴⁶

Arguably the most fascinating aspects of these letters from the consul in Chicago were his own interpretations of American society near the turn of the twentieth century and the visible contradictions he discerned between the holier-than-thou tone expressed in American newspapers versus the actual news unfolding within the borders of the United States. Of particular interest was an anecdote reported by the consul in 1899, when a Jewish cadet was forced to leave the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, following repeated anti-Semitic treatment from his classmates. On this issue, the consul in Chicago noted that the American press remained silent. “It is, anyhow, the third incident of this sort that has occurred in recent years... We are getting used to being treated in the manner in which we treat China...At home, we cover up all things,” he mused, mimicking the American thought process, “but when we need to provide something exciting to our readers, we demand light, always more light on the affairs of France.”⁴⁷ If American anti-Semitism and hypocrisy were not already disgraceful enough, the consul also hurled accusations at the Americans for being fortunate geographically, yet ungrateful to the French, who had helped secure American independence over a century earlier:

If they had, to the west, a powerful Mexico possessing a fleet twice their size, and wealth, and an incommensurable means of attacking them, the press of this country would better understand the indignity of its current behavior against our nation, which has poured its blood and given its gold, even when it was weak and fighting almost

without hope for its independence from which it has grown ever since.⁴⁸

The link between the foreign press and diplomacy was clear to the Chicago consul. In his view, the press was a tool with which geopolitical games could be conducted. This was by no means incorrect, for as has been noted earlier, the British press printed false stories about Dreyfus's escape from Devil's Island with the hopes that this would reignite the affair. Indeed, the British motivation for doing so was, as Ronald Huch contended, to help encourage anti-French sentiment and in turn promote the superiority of the British.⁴⁹ The French diplomat in Chicago perceived many similarities in American press coverage, speculating that the country's pro-Dreyfus sentiments stemmed from, above all, a desire for Anglo-American friendship: "I am convinced that the American press would not be so violent against us, if behind its movements existed the desire...to benefit their new British friends."⁵⁰ This is precisely what Egal Feldman speculates, referring to the Anglo-American friendship as "a rediscovery of a common Anglo-Saxon heritage, a 'unique partnership'; proposals were even made for an alliance or reunion of the English-speaking people."⁵¹ But the consul in Chicago was not only concerned with the burgeoning Anglo-American friendship. In a letter sent on September 10, 1899, the French diplomat also reported that Kaiser Wilhelm II recently sent a German flag to Chicago and remarked to an American that "a war between Germany and the United States would be impossible."⁵² For the French, witnessing this condemnation from both Britain and Germany must have been a gravely concerning diplomatic development. Perhaps most frustrating of all was the fact that France was powerless to control the American press. With regards to the United States, therefore, France found itself in a subservient position, only able to express its displeasure in private dispatches sent back to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris.

Beyond Europe and the United States, France attempted to control the foreign discourse surrounding the Dreyfus affair with greater latitude, particularly in South America and India. No longer burdened by strictly enforced liberal freedoms granted to the press, the French could refocus their attention to influencing the printed word, which they never dared to do in Europe or the United States. Indeed, on September 19, 1897, Minister Hanotaux sent a telegram to the French consul in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. “I understand that certain Brazilian newspapers are covering the Dreyfus Affair in order to spread negative press about the government of the Republic,” the minister said, “I ask you to keep watch over this campaign, and if necessary, refute the noise put into circulation.”⁵³ The order coming from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs here was somewhat ambiguous—perhaps Hanotaux was using a euphemism to advocate for direct attempts at censorship of the Brazilian newspapers. Even if Hanotaux only meant for his consul in Rio to make a public denunciation of the Brazilian press, this still demonstrated a degree of direct intervention into another country’s foreign affairs that France did not even attempt to employ in Europe.

France still met some opposition in its quest to control the foreign press outside of Europe. Perhaps the most glaring failure came in British-controlled India, following a particularly incendiary sermon given by the bishop of Calcutta in September 1899. The speech, which was printed in its entirety in the local newspaper *The Englishman*, attacked the moral fiber of the French state for allowing the Dreyfus affair to transpire in the first place, despite the recent pardon of the artillery captain. The bishop began by lamenting the entire ordeal: “What has become then of those high principles of liberty, equality, and brotherhood of which France has been held to be the self-constituted exponent? What final interest can a nation possess save in truth and justice and equity?”⁵⁴ Next, he issued an attack on France,

denouncing the French people with a flourish:

There are conditions of a comity among nations as among individuals. We do not endow a man with our confidence if he has proved guilty of some flagrant crime; at least until he has repented of it. Nor can we stand upon friendly terms with a nation of men which has violated the elementary laws of human truth and justice.⁵⁵

Despite this disappointment in the French regime though, the bishop's sermon concluded on an optimistic note:

Let us pray then that France, that great and gallant nation, may know ere it be too late "the things which belong unto her peace." Let us pray that she may cast off the bondage of that military spirit which idolizes and sanctifies mere force. Let us pray that she may turn her back upon the unhappy policy which has too often in public life ignored or dishonoured the sacred name of God. Let us pray that in her national history she may recognize and realise yet again the eternal principles of truth and justice and equity.⁵⁶

Unsurprisingly, the French found this sermon to be harsh and unacceptable, going so far as to lodge an official complaint with the British colonial government.⁵⁷ Citing a number of different passages from the sermon, including one in which the bishop advocated a boycott of the 1900 World's Fair, the French consul general in Calcutta claimed that the sermon was "injurious" and "an act of hostility against France." Three weeks later, the French government received a response from the colonial government, which refused to apologize for the bishop's behavior:

The government of India can accept no responsibility for statements on matters of current interest that may be uttered from the pulpit either by the metropolitan or by any Bishop or minister of religion in India. Such a responsibility is not, so far as the government of India are aware, assumed by the civil power in any country; and it would appear to be fatal to that freedom of thought and speech with which the pulpit among all civilized peoples is, by virtues of its moral and spiritual authority, endowed.⁵⁸

This controversy helps reveal a crucial element of the French response to the foreign press: the French government was concerned not only with newspaper coverage pertaining to the Dreyfus affair, but also with the spread of information pertaining to Dreyfus more generally, whether it be a sermon or a theater production. Nor did these goals seem to have any sort of geographic limits—indeed even India, which was neither a French colony nor close to the European continent, was not exempt from receiving the attention of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

That the French government invested so many resources in the monitoring of the foreign press served as a tacit acknowledgement that the foreign press was among the primary engines driving the scandal of the Dreyfus affair. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had a rather simple strategy when it came to controlling coverage of the affair: limit any discourse, positive or negative, pertaining to Alfred Dreyfus. The hope was that by limiting any kind of knowledge, foreign populations would eventually lose interest in the drama of the affair. Given the links between

foreign and French publications, this strategy might have served as a means of minimizing French interest in the affair as well.

As a result, within Europe the French government looked to control those elements of the press that it could manipulate with ease. This frequently meant wielding France's close diplomatic ties to its neighbors to engage in a sort of "cultural diplomacy," by which France could convince other countries to suppress certain theater productions about Dreyfus. In this cultural realm, however, France experienced limited victories. The theater had been the primary means of disseminating information to the masses in the mid-nineteenth century, but by the turn of the twentieth century, the masses of Europe began to receive much of their information from the press. And when France turned its sights to this newly influential European press, other states' liberal press laws severely limited the country's ability to restrict the growing discourse of the Dreyfus affair.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the French experienced no successes of any sort. The American press viewed the Dreyfus affair as a means of solidifying its friendship with Britain and felt especially secure in knowing that the French could not censor them in any way. The only arena in which the French government could attempt to control both the press and the cultural sphere, therefore, was outside of the United States and Europe. Even in these cases, however, the French experienced opposition. In a humiliating display of its own weakness, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could not even manage to quell the anti-French rhetoric of an anonymous preacher in the British imperial colony of India. This incident served to demonstrate both the incredible spread of information about Dreyfus's plight, as well as the inability of France to control foreign engagement with the scandal.

Confronted by a new era in which the press acted as the engine of knowledge and scandal in the world, the French were presented with a Sisyphean endeavor when it came to limiting the scope of the Dreyfus affair. These forces would only con-

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tinue to swell in the coming twentieth century, as newspapers continued to exert a massive influence on society. Indeed, in the years leading up to the First World War, the German government also began to closely monitor the press as a means of gauging public opinion. It too viewed the press as a device with which it could track and potentially influence the public.⁵⁹ The Germans would soon find, as the French had before, that their patriotic press was ultimately impossible to control. The British would also come to learn this lesson, for in 1909, the famous “We want eight and won’t wait!” slogan propagated by the patriotic press and naval armament interest groups compelled the Liberal government to double its annual dreadnought production from four to eight ships.⁶⁰ These were the same underlying forces that gripped France during the affair. The Dreyfus affair was thus a preview of the powerful mass media and domestic pressures that would come to characterize twentieth-century European states.

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NOTES

- ¹ Alfred Dreyfus, *Five Years of My Life* (New York: Peebles Press, 1977), 40.
- ² *Ibid.*, 65.
- ³ Christophe Charle, *Le siècle de la presse, 1830-1939* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 11.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ James F. Brennan, *The Reflection of the Dreyfus Affair in the European Press, 1897-1899* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998), 97.
- ⁶ One of the main forgers, Colonel Hubert-Joseph Henry, confessed to his transgression and committed suicide in 1898, one year before Dreyfus's retrial. The artillery captain's second trial, therefore, was widely expected to exonerate him. One pro-Dreyfus French newspaper, *Le Siècle*, even wrote in advance of the trial that "the result is no longer doubtful."
- ⁷ Archives Diplomatiques, Relations Franco-Allemagnes, NS 58.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Martyn Cornick, "The Dreyfus Affair – another year, another centenary. British opinion and the Rennes verdict, September 1899," *Modern & Contemporary France* 7, no. 4 (1999): 503.
- ¹⁰ Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF), NAF 16823.
- ¹¹ In other words, the significance of this dispatch, which was no more than 150 words in length, required the message to traverse two continents, four countries, and three separate languages.
- ¹² BnF, NAF 28046 (29).
- ¹³ Ricky Lee Sherrod, "Images and Reflections: The Response of the British Press to the Dreyfus Affair" (PhD dissertation, Michigan State University, 1980), 52.
- ¹⁴ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 53. In a statement given nearly a year later in 1898, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bernhard von Bülow, confirmed his government's desire to stay out of the Dreyfus Affair. Bülow commented, "Even if they did exist, we should not admit the alleged relations between Mr. von Schwartzkoppen and Esterhazy, as such an indiscretion would render much more difficult the process of procuring information from agents in the future...Our principle interest is to rest as far outside the Affair as possible." Thus, while Bülow hoped for a long and drawn-out affair at France's expense, the German minister of foreign affairs hoped such a scenario would transpire without German diplomatic involvement. For more, see Éric Cahm, "L'Affaire Dreyfus dans la presse quotidienne allemande 1897-1899," in *L'Affaire Dreyfus et l'opinion publique* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1995), 215–228.
- ¹⁵ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 53. Note that in some cases, French diplomats translated the names of foreign newspapers into French. This appears to be

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one of those cases.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ George R. Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair: A Chronological History* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 134.

¹⁸ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 53.

¹⁹ Sherrod, "Images and Reflections," 38.

²⁰ Nelly Wilson, "Paroles et silences: réflexions sur le rôle joué par la presse britannique dans l'Affaire Dreyfus," in *L'Affaire Dreyfus et l'opinion publique*, 295.

²¹ Sherrod, "Images and Reflections," 40.

²² Archives Diplomatiques, NS 54.

²³ Ronald K. Huch, "British Reaction to the Dreyfus Affair," *Social Science* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1975): 27.

²⁴ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 54.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Robert Justin Goldstein, *Censorship of Political Caricature in Nineteenth-Century France* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1989), 2.

²⁹ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 53.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 58.

³² Archives Diplomatiques, NS 53.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ For a brief study of twentieth-century cultural diplomacy, see Frederick C. Barghoorn, "Soviet Cultural Diplomacy since Stalin," *The Russian Review* 17, no. 1 (January 1958): 41–55.

³⁵ Michael Burns, "The Policy of Pardoning: Dreyfus and the World's Fair in 1900," in *L'Affaire Dreyfus et l'opinion publique*, 32.

³⁶ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 58.

³⁷ Burns, "The Policy of Pardoning," 33.

³⁸ Egal Feldman, *The Dreyfus Affair and the American Conscience, 1895-1906* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 7.

³⁹ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 26.

⁴¹ Brennan, *The Reflection of the Dreyfus Affair in the European Press*, 101.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 53.

⁴⁴ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 58.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

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⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ For more, see Ronald K. Huch, “British Reaction to the Dreyfus Affair,” and Sherrod, “Images and Reflections.”

⁵⁰ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 58.

⁵¹ Feldman, *The Dreyfus Affair and the American Conscience*, 18.

⁵² Archives Diplomatiques, NS 58.

⁵³ Archives Diplomatiques, NS 53.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980), 364–366.

⁶⁰ Kenneth L. Moll, “Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain’s 1909 Dreadnought ‘Gap,’” *Military Affairs* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1965): 140–141.

Images

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