

## **Media and Exclusion in the Dreyfus Affair**

Challenge Question: While Dreyfus saw himself as a patriotic Frenchman, his identity as a Jew seemed more significant to his detractors than his nationality — or the facts of his case. How did the media contrast ideas of French nationalism and citizenship in such polarizing ways?

### **Introduction**

In the XIX century, the press was a powerful tool in the process of building the newly emerging nations. Besides spreading knowledge, media spread propaganda in political attempts to create shared national identity. The case of the Dreyfus Affair in France is particularly important for studying the role of media in shaping the public opinion and the social polarization concerning the position of the Jews in the French nation. Stereotypical images and tropes circulated in the press spread anti-Semitism in that period.

Alfred Dreyfus was a Jewish officer who was accused of being a traitor in 1894 and sentenced to life imprisonment for revealing French military secrets to the German Embassy in Paris. He was imprisoned in Devil's Island in French Guiana becoming stateless and literally excluded from the French nation.

It is crucial to keep in mind the historical context and the way the French nation came into being in comparison to, or even in opposition to, other nations. The Franco - Prussian war (1870-71) was an important historical moment: the Germans needed to build a German nation relying on a strong army, and the power of their military force became crucial in the formation of German national identity. Before 1871, "German" identity did not really exist, as people were either Prussian or Bavarian, but not 'German'. While Germany built its national identity after winning the war, humiliated France had to find new tools to forge its own one. The Dreyfus case was an example of unifying the French nation against an "inner enemy": the Jews. Like Russia, where in the last decades of the XIX century anti-Semitism emerged and grew into a very strong public movement, preceding the Dreyfus Affair and perhaps setting an example for the French, some intellectual circles in France decided to build the idea of the French nation through propagating violent language against Jewish citizens and polarizing the French society.

### **Stereotypes and Anti-Semitism**

The ways Jewish people were negatively stereotyped and accused of the defeat in the war are exemplified in the Book by Édouard Drumont *La France Juive* (1886). The cover of the book represents an armored crusading knight crushing a Jewish man lying under his feet. The Jewish man is naked, his nose is hooked and he is holding a bag of gold coins, as anti-Semitic supporters believed that the Jews only cared about money.

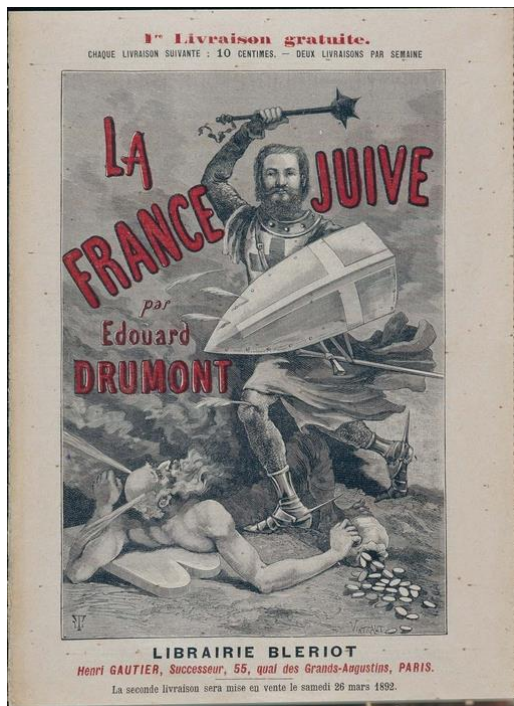


Fig. 1. La France juive par Édouard DRUMONT (1844-1917). 1er fascicule de l'édition de 1892 (1ere édition de 1886) © Collection Jonas / KHARBINE-TAPABOR, Le Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration.

It did not matter how Jewish were assimilated into society: anti-Semitism proved hard to die, and it became a serious social and political problem because it awoke every time there was a political crisis. As we have seen in the cover image of the book, such representations of the new French nation that suppressed the Jewish people in the same way as the crusaders had persecuted the heretics, became a popular image. In his book, Drumont attacks the Jews arguing that “the Jews formerly had a nationality and they lost it” which is a telling example of how the language of hate can easily exclude citizens from the nation. Meanwhile, Jewish people were homogenized and presented through stereotypical images which often put at their center the idea of Jews as “attached to money”. Drumont writes: “Thanks to their genius as conspirators and traffickers they reconstituted a money power that is formidable, not only through the force that money itself possesses, but because the Jews have diminished or destroyed the other powers so that only theirs remain, because they have modeled, fashioned, molded a society where money is the true master of all.”<sup>1</sup> Another important element of the anti-Semitic rhetoric that Drumont utilized was the link with the military affairs, in the way Drumont accuses the Jews of morally destroying the French army: “The Jews have done what they announced, and we must recognize that they have proceeded to this moral destruction of the French army with unequalled virtuosity.”<sup>2</sup>

### Images of polarization

Beside books like the one written by Drumont, there were also many cartoons, stereotypical representations of the Jews that even a common man could follow, or even a child could understand. They used simple words and stereotypical arguments. It was an efficient,

<sup>1</sup> Édouard Drumont, *Les Juifs Contre la France*, (Paris, Librairie Antisemite) (1898)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

functional way to reach out to people who were not able to read. Moreover, such representations accompanied many of the mass rallies and mass demonstrations “explaining” the Dreyfus affair in series of images that spread anti-Semitic sentiments and stereotypes targeted towards the newly emerging mass media audience.



Fig. 2 “History of a Traitor,” 1899, Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem, F/261.



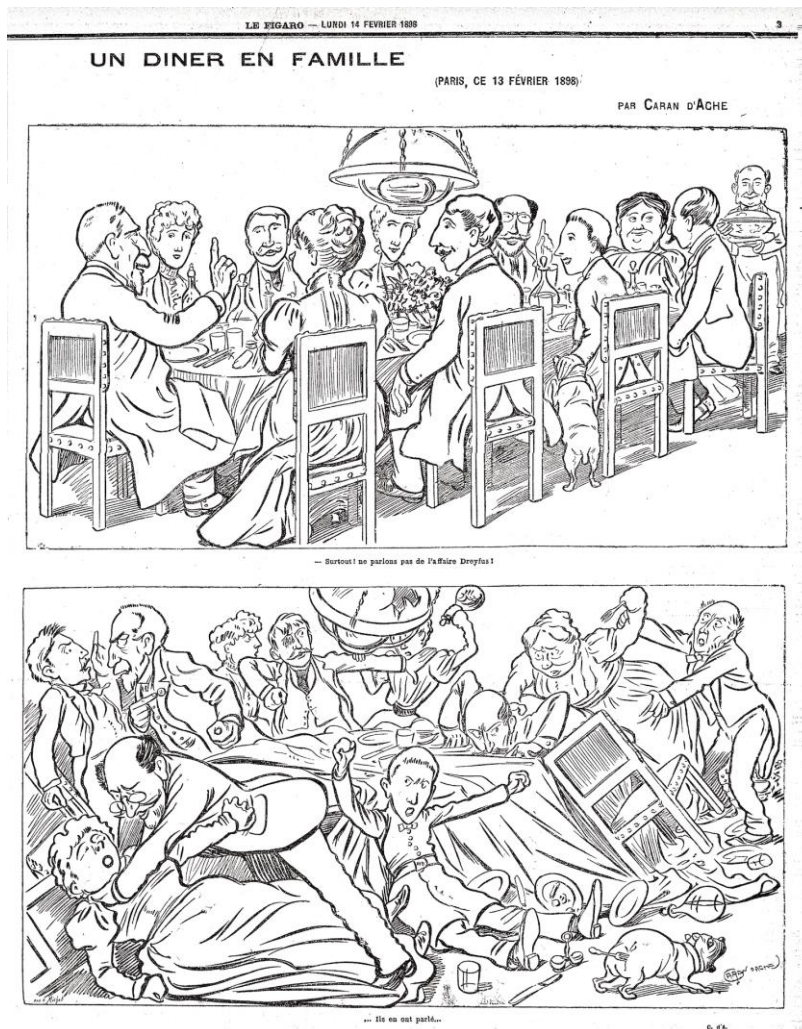


Fig. 3. Cartoon by Caran D'Ache, Le Figaro, February 14, 1898.

Media then polarized the French society. During this heated debate, which shook the French people to the core, as it is represented by the cartoon of a family (meaning France) fighting over a dinner table, some voices raised in defense of the Jews. They particularly polarized around what became famous as the Dreyfus Affair.

### Voices in defense of Dreyfus

During this time, when the stereotypical image of the Jews was constructed, and the Dreyfus Affair was a particularly telling case in this regard, some intellectuals raised their voice in defense of Dreyfus. The French writer Emile Zola supported Dreyfus in a letter to the President of the Republic of France, Félix Faure, titled "J'accuse" (January 13, 1898). This letter was instrumental in generating public response and it was a detailed account with precise information and facts. In the XIX century, it was common for writers and poets to openly express their political opinions. It was a courageous act. Emile Zola wrote an open letter to the president and accused the army targeting the most powerful institutions at that moment in France. Soon after, Zola himself was convicted and fled the country but his powerful words stirred demonstrations and helped Dreyfus to be freed, although after many years (1906).

## Conclusion

During these years, the Hungarian journalist Theodor Herzl travelled from Austria to France in order to attend Dreyfus' trial as the correspondent for the *Neue Freie Presse*. He was a witness of the anti-Semitic mass rallies in Paris following the Dreyfus' trial. He was deeply affected by what he saw. In 1896, he published a pamphlet titled "The Jewish State" (*Der Judenstaat*), where he wrote in its *Preface*: "It depends on the Jews themselves whether this political pamphlet remains for the present a political romance. If the present generation is too dull to understand it rightly, a future, finer and better generation will arise to understand it. The Jews who wish for a State shall have it, and they will deserve to have it." Herzl advocated the founding of a Jewish state as he became convinced that Jews would never be assimilated into the populations in which they lived. And even if they assimilated, anti-Semitism would always be a threat of displacement. Therefore, he saw as the only solution the creation of a nationalist Jewish state. By March 1897, Herzl convened the Zionist Congress at Basel, and in August that year the First Zionist Congress adopted the national platform, "The aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a publicly legally assured home in Palestine." This idea of Herzl slowly grew into reality in Israel in 1948.