

***J'Accuse...!*: Émile Zola and The Dreyfus Affair**

by Boran Göher

"I accuse Major Du Paty de Clam... I accuse General Mercier... I accuse General Billot... I accuse General De Boisdeffre and General Gonse... I accuse General De Pellieux and commander Ravary... I accuse the three handwriting experts, sirs Belhomme, Varinard and Couard... I accuse the offices of the war... Finally, I accuse the first council of war..." [\(1\)](#)

These are all the explicit accusations made in Émile Zola's 1898 open letter *J'Accuse...!*, addressed to then President of France, Félix François Faure, accusing the President and government at large of antisemitic practices, which Zola maintained were a root cause of the conviction of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish military captain. The letter created a considerable commotion both in France and worldwide. Following the letter's immense popularity, Zola was tried for and later found guilty of libel. As a result, he had to escape to England to avoid imprisonment.

In 1894, captain Alfred Dreyfus was found guilty of leaking military documents to the Imperial German army in a closed trial. He was charged with treason and exiled to Devil's Island, a popular destination for French exilées at the time, for a lifetime. Despite initially not being a very controversial decision, the following years saw the conviction become an incredibly prominent issue within French politics in a few years. Specifically, when journalist Bernard Lazare, working at the time with Alfred's brother Mathieu, released the first of publications doubting the fairness of the conviction, the influence on politicians and the general public was small. However, when the investigation of Major Georges Picquart revealed more concrete documents indicating that Major Esterhazy, another officer within the French army, could be the real culprit, the tide started to turn in Dreyfus' favor.

The situation continued to escalate, and now there was a real "Dreyfus Affair" in the hands of the French Third Republic. The public's dissatisfaction with the exile of Dreyfus continued to rise, and no longer could the political sphere continue to ignore the case. At the beginning of the year 1898, another closed trial was held for the case of Esterhazy. The trial saw the accuser, Picquart, become the real accused. However, he was dishonored in the military due to the trial, whereas Esterhazy was celebrated as a hero by the antisemites. The trial itself would later be seen as a sham, with the presence of dubious experts and very little pressure on Esterhazy to tell the truth. This ignited a state of distaste among the prominent educated figures in France, the most important of those being Émile Zola.

Zola published the aforementioned open letter in 1898 as a means of continuing the legal fight for Dreyfus. His open letter *J'Accuse...!* accomplished this two-fold. Firstly, it caused Zola to be tried for libel. Secondly, the accompanying chaos necessitated the opening of a public debate at a Cour d'assises, the rough French equivalent of a jury trial. As Zola's trial went on, more and more riots, both by those supporting Dreyfus, and the nationalists against his cause, were started. And Zola was not the only intellectual to rise. Almost all intellectual behemoths of the time rose to take place in the debacle, some even on the opposite side of Zola. The Dreyfus Affair was now truly underway.

The stage for the affair to rise, I believe, is more critical than the affair itself. The affair itself went as anyone might expect. There were riots by both parties, some of which were violent. Trials were leading to further trials. Some governments bowed out and some others were reinstated. The usual fare continued for years. In 1902, Émile Zola, unfortunately, passed away due to carbon monoxide poisoning. The same year, a leftist government was formed in France, which later brought the affair back to the public eyes and subsequently started rehabilitation of Alfred Dreyfus in 1903. The process took until 1906 when the Supreme Court unanimously canceled the Dreyfus case's earlier verdicts. Dreyfus was reinstated to the French army, but he retired shortly after.

However, we are less concerned with Dreyfus than we are with Zola. It might now be called "The Dreyfus Affair," but the main actor was undoubtedly Zola. I mentioned that Zola's actions caused all intellectuals in France to get involved. This is an understatement. Zola's actions defined what an "intellectual" was. If we have any kind of notion of why and how any intellectual should be involved in political or daily life, it is because of the reach and effect of *J'Accuse...!*. Indeed, the definition of an intellectual within our minds today largely hinges on the actions of the intellectuals involved in The Dreyfus Affair. After all, The Dreyfus Affair caused a massive shift in French politics and life, and in the center of it all was an open letter written by an intellectual who had dared to go to prison just to see justice prevail.

Nowadays, everyone remembers Zola, but few remember the moderates who wanted the opposition to proceed in quiet and peace. We are often told to stay within the bounds of moderation and not venture too far into the "extreme." We are told that that is a wise decision: a purely capitalist notion, no doubt. Staying moderate, trying to take the middle road, and not committing to your actions entirely are great ways to generate the most significant profit possible for a corporation. Still, sometimes, real change requires extreme effort. Zola's words were calculated; nonetheless, they earned him many enemies. Some tried to use his words against him, saying he was a traitor. The judicial system attempted to imprison him for his comments. Perhaps his life would have lasted much longer had he not written those words, but without them, the push for justice and equality against antisemitism and corruption would have never been complete. For me, the moral of the story is that we should not be bound by what people perceive as acceptable when trying to bring about change. If necessary, we should not be afraid of the extreme. After all, why should any of us take advice meant for corporations?