



**Germany, right? Wrong.**

If I asked you which country is considered to have been the most anti-Semitic in Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you would say “Germany,” right? Wrong. Let me tell you my story.

My name is Alfred Dreyfus, born in Mulhouse, Alsace on October 9, 1859, the last of seven children. You know Alsace—it is the area that the Prussians took from France following the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. My family had been in that region for a long time, considered itself French, and could not bear to be German. I was also negatively affected by the Prussian occupation. My father moved the entire family to France proper. I graduated from an elite French school and entered the army as an officer. I was proud of myself and a true patriot, because, I thought, France allowed Jews to progress in its society; if what happened to me had happened to someone else, I never would have believed that the French would have been capable of it. In fact, I now admit, I was perhaps too proud to the point of being haughty. Some historians say that I isolated myself from my fellow officers and this attitude contributed to the treatment I received, but if so it was extreme.

I got married on April 18, 1891 and had two children. The Superior War College accepted me as a student and I graduated ninth in my class, so



everything was going great until in 1892 an officer filed a bad report about me just because I was Jewish. Of course I protested this treatment, but my objection eventually boomeranged against me.

In 1894, some sensitive papers that showed that a French military officer was passing secrets to the Germans were discovered in the wastepaper basket of the German military attaché. I had access to the kind of information that was passed on and I was accused because I was a Jew. (Can you imagine that? Being accused of giving secret information to the Germans because you're a Jew?) The army court-martialed me in an unfair trial, stripped me of my rank in a humiliating ceremony, and sent me off to the penal colony of Devil's Island for life. The right wing press, which was then conducting a powerful campaign against the Third Republic, not only attacked me but cited the episode as proof of a Jewish conspiracy against France. Nobody believed me and I couldn't get any support. Even the chief of army intelligence was shipped off to Tunisia when he investigated the matter and concluded that not me but that another officer, Walsin Esterhazy (<http://www.answers.com/topic/ferdinand-walsin-esterhazy>), was the culprit. The army, however, was not interested in guilt or innocence but in saving face and condemning a Jew.

Members of my family who were trying to get support hooked up with a famous novelist, Emile Zola. He wrote a spirited defense of me—addressed to the President of the Republic—in Georges Clemenceau's newspaper, "J'accuse" [I accuse] (<http://columbia.thefreedictionary.com/J'accuse>), in which he said that



the army had railroaded me. Zola was condemned for libel and had to flee to England to avoid jail. (Poor Zola! He died on September 28, 1902, in his sleep of carbon monoxide poisoning. The rumor was that his enemies blocked off his chimney causing the gas to kill him. In 1908 Zola's remains were transported to the Panthéon, where famous Frenchmen are entombed. I attended the ceremony, but someone shot at me and wounded me in the arm.) The result was a decade-long fight that pitted the right, the army, and the French Catholic Church (they claimed that there was a Jewish-Freemason conspiracy against France) against the Radicals, Republicans, and Socialists who defended the Republic. In 1899, the army gave me a new trial. By that time they had caught a colonel who had forged documents against me and committed suicide so he couldn't talk, but despite that they condemned me again, this time to "only" ten years.

Luckily, the left got together and formed a coalition government that saved the Republic, cleaned out the army of enemies of the Republic (but not completely, they popped up again during the Vichy period of World War II), and implemented the separation of Church and State by doing away with Napoleon's 1801 Concordat. In September 1899, the President pardoned me, but it took me seven more years, until 1906, to be completely vindicated and restored to my rank in the military. I retired in 1907 but was called back to active duty during World War I.



You can gauge the extent of anti-Semitism and lack of democracy in France during this period, but at least the wrong done to me was reversed and the Third Republic was saved. And you thought the history of France was boring!

NOTE: Alfred Dreyfus died on July 12, 1935, two days before the French National Holiday and just before the leftist alliance known as the Popular Front came to power. On July 14, his funeral cortege passed through the ranks of troops assembled for the occasion. There is an American connection: Actors Richard Dreyfuss and Julia Louis-Dreyfus are distant relatives.

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