

*H-France Forum*, Volume 6, Issue 3 (Fall 2011), No. 3

Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2010. xvii+542 pp. Illust., notes, bibliog., index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-312-57298-3; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN10: 0-312-57298-0

Review Essay by Vicki Caron, Cornell University.

Ruth Harris's new book on the Dreyfus Affair is simultaneously fascinating and frustrating. The book is fascinating in that it is packed with new information gleaned primarily from collections of private correspondence, much of which has not previously been consulted by historians. This correspondence includes, for example, some 400 personal letters sent to Lucie Dreyfus, the wife of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish captain accused by the French military of high treason at the end of 1894, as well letters written by the leading figures in both the Jesuit and Assumptionist congregations, and Emile Zola's personal correspondence with both his wife and mistress. In drawing on this extraordinary treasure trove, Harris reconstructs not only the public behavior of the major players in the Dreyfus Affair, but their private behavior as well. In so doing, she offers by far the most comprehensive and vivid insight into the culture of this tumultuous period.

Harris's book is ultimately frustrating, however, in that it puts forth an unconvincing thesis not supported by the evidence. As Harris states, her goal is to deconstruct the myths and legends surrounding the Dreyfus Affair. She argues that the Dreyfus Affair was not a great manichean battle between the forces of truth, reason, justice, and integrity, on the one side, and those of irrationalism and integral nationalism, on the other. Instead, she posits that the two camps were in reality more fractured and diverse than historians have depicted them to be, and she especially endeavors to show that the Dreyfusards were not always such staunch defenders of liberalism, religious toleration, and justice. Rather, she suggests that both Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards were motivated more by emotion and passion than by genuine concern for the evidence. For Harris, the ultimate proof of the Dreyfusard camp's illiberalism was the zealous anticlerical campaign they pursued in the aftermath of Dreyfus's pardon in 1899. Whereas Jews had been unjustly vilified by the anti-Dreyfusard camp during the Dreyfus Affair, Harris claims that Catholics were unjustly "persecuted" by the state during the Affair's aftermath. Hence, she argues, the Dreyfusards were not the pure, high-minded individuals portrayed in the history books, and she urges her readers to put aside their preconceptions of the Dreyfus Affair as a civil war between the "two Frances." While acknowledging that it is easy to condemn the "absolutism" of the right, the "dangerous absolutism" of the left, Harris cautions, should not be ignored (p. 384).

This thesis, while tantalizing, is not supported by Harris's own evidence. If anything, the abundant private correspondence she has so assiduously mined suggests that there was little discrepancy between the public and private behavior of the major players in the Affair. This correspondence also shows that while spokesmen on both sides felt passionately about their convictions, the vast majority of those who joined the Dreyfusard camp did so because they were swayed by the growing mountain of evidence in favor of Dreyfus's innocence, whereas those who sided with the anti-Dreyfusards were determined to ignore the evidence at all costs. It was precisely because the evidence in this case was so overwhelmingly one sided that the Dreyfus Affair offers one of those rare historical instances when there was little moral ambiguity. One side did represent the values of truth and justice, while the other

represented irrationalism, bigotry, and a willingness to sacrifice an individual to achieve a longstanding political goal—undermining the Third Republic. It may be true that these two coalitions rapidly disintegrated in the aftermath of Dreyfus's pardon in 1899, and it may also be true that the anticlerical campaign of the early years of the twentieth century was overly zealous, although this question is not as clear cut as Harris suggests. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, Harris's own account, notwithstanding this thesis, actually bolsters the idea of the "two Frances."

Harris's narrative can be read at several levels. At the most basic level, she recounts the political events surrounding the Dreyfus Affair. Although she does not offer any new information or insights into the motivations of the upper echelons of the army, this story is nevertheless told in an engaging and compelling way. Harris describes how Dreyfus was initially accused in late 1894 of selling military secrets to the Germans after a cleaning woman discovered a torn up note in the trash bin of the German military attaché, Colonel Maximilien von Schwartzkoppen. The handwriting on this document, which came to be known as the *bordereau*, resembled that of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, one of the few Jews who had succeeded in penetrating the ranks of the General Staff. Although handwriting analysts were divided over whether the writing on the *bordereau* matched Dreyfus's, the generals ultimately did not need much convincing. Dreyfus was court-martialed behind closed doors in December 1894, solely on the basis of the *bordereau*, and in January he was publicly degraded in the courtyard of the Ecole Militaire. In a humiliating ceremony, the military insignia were stripped off of his uniform and cap, and his sword was broken in two. Despite his strenuous protestations of innocence, Dreyfus was shipped off to the penal colony of Devil's island in French Guiana, where he spent the next four years in solitary confinement.

Whether Dreyfus had been targeted because he was a Jew remains unclear, but Harris follows Michael Burns in showing that a number of army officers were antisemitic and in suggesting that this attitude predisposed them to blame Dreyfus prematurely without exploring the alternatives.[1] In 1892, Dreyfus had already suffered discrimination at the hands of General Pierre de Bonnefond, who had unabashedly informed him that "Jews were not wanted on the General Staff" (p. 63). More seriously, in an incident Harris does not explore, Commandant Hubert-Joseph Henry, who worked for the army's Statistical Bureau, the counter-intelligence agency in charge of the investigation, allegedly leaked news of Dreyfus's arrest to the antisemitic leader, Edouard Drumont, before the Military High Command intended the information to become public. According to documents published in 1899, on October 28, 1894, Henry contacted a member of the staff of Drumont's newspaper, the *Libre Parole*, to reveal the news of Dreyfus's arrest, and he added, "All Israel is in a state of agitation." When Drumont published this sensational information four days later, he declared, "The affair will be hushed up because this officer is a Jew....There is absolute proof that he sold our military secrets to Germany." [2]

Harris also concurs with scholars who believe that the military, at least initially, was acting in good faith since they sincerely believed in Dreyfus's guilt. Soon, however, Colonel Georges Picquart, who took over the Statistical Bureau in the spring of 1896, began to carry out his own investigation after the same cleaning woman discovered scraps of yet another note in Schwartzkoppen's trash bin suggesting that military secrets were still being sold. When Picquart compared the handwriting on this note, which came to be known as the *petit bleu*, to that on the *bordereau*, he realized that they had been written by the same person. Since this person could not possibly be Dreyfus, Picquart's suspicions turned to another officer, Commandant Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy. Picquart took this information to his superiors, who in turn told him that these two documents had nothing to do with one another, despite the striking similarities in handwriting. Indeed, his immediate superior, General Charles-Arthur Gonse, even asked, "What can it matter to you whether this Jew remained on Devil's Island?" (p. 79). At this point Picquart realized that there was a cover-up within the military that extended all the way up to General Auguste Mercier, the Minister of War. It was also at this point that Henry, in an effort to shore up the army's case against Dreyfus, began to forge additional documents to pad Dreyfus's file. Finally, while Picquart's evidence pointed to Esterhazy, so too did the evidence being gathered by

members of Dreyfus's circle, especially his brother Mathieu, the prominent liberal deputy Joseph Reinach, and the publicist Bernard Lazare, an anarchist turned Zionist, who emerged as Dreyfus's most ardent defender. It was in late 1897, after Lazare published his pamphlet *Une erreur judiciaire: La vérité sur l'Affaire Dreyfus*, which for the first time included the text of the *bordereau*, obtained from one of the handwriting analysts, that the Dreyfus case turned into the Dreyfus Affair.

This oft-told political story is in reality only the scaffolding upon which Harris hangs her main account—a description of how the two camps—the Dreyfusards and the anti-Dreyfusards—coalesced. It is in exploring these networks of interpersonal relationships that Harris is at her best. By using a wealth of personal correspondence she has assiduously tracked down, in addition to an immense amount of archival documentation and published material, she offers an intimate lens into the personalities and culture of the time. Here we gain insight into the way in which Zola juggled his two discrete lives—that with his wife, with whom he had a childless marriage, and that with his mistress, with whom he had two children. We are also afforded a glance into the private life of one of the most prominent Jewish dynasties of the time—the Reinachs. Here Harris shows that Joseph Reinach's two brothers—Salomon and Théodore—both of whom were prominent scholars, frequently used antisemitic stereotypes in their correspondence with one another, despite their intellectual commitment to universalistic values. From this correspondence, Harris concludes that French Jews were significantly more clannish in private than their public demeanor suggested. She also explores why so many Alsatians became involved in the Affair, although I am not sure that she gets to the heart of the matter here. For many on the right, such as Drumont or Léon Daudet, the loyalties of even Alsatians who, like Dreyfus's family, had opted for French citizenship after the Franco-Prussian War, remained suspect. The fact that these individuals spoke French with Germanic accents and frequently traveled to the annexed provinces, either to visit relatives or to conduct business, fueled suspicions that they were engaged in espionage.[3]

Harris likewise presents much new information on the Assumptionist order, which played an important role during the Affair because their two newspapers—*La Croix* and *Le Pèlerin*—were fiercely antisemitic. Indeed, their antisemitism was so virulent and guttural, frequently manifesting itself in attacks on the Talmud and charges of ritual murder, that two sisters—"les Mères Franck"—who had converted from Judaism and had become nuns in the Oblates de l'Assomption, a congregation under the direction of the Assumptionists, privately chastised the head of the order, Père François Picard. As Miriam Franck complained to Picard in 1885, the incessant harping on ritual murder belied his ignorance of Judaism and "must revolt readers and give birth to feelings of hatred and vengeance in all who believe it" (p. 227). Apparently, neither Picard nor Père Vincent de Paul Bailly, who managed the Assumptionist press, paid any heed to Franck's complaints since these accusations were ratcheted up significantly in the 1890s.

Most importantly, Harris describes the way in which intellectuals as a group became politically mobilized for the first time. The majority of them lent their support to the Dreyfusard cause, and in January 1898, at the time of the Zola trial, when the famous writer was accused of having defamed the General Staff in his pamphlet *J'accuse*, some 3,000 intellectuals signed petitions demanding a new trial for Dreyfus due to the flawed nature of the evidence. In response, right-wing intellectuals, whom Harris oddly calls "anti-intellectuals," also began to mobilize.[4] Led by Maurice Barrès, Ferdinand Brunetière, and Charles Maurras, they articulated an exclusionary brand of nationalism that excluded Jews, Protestants, and freemasons and called for a return to a more authoritarian and Catholic France. To be sure, not everyone on the right was a monarchist like Maurras; Barrès, Brunetière, and Paul Déroulède, the leader of the Ligue des patriotes, were all willing to accept a republican form of government. But the republic they desired was not the Third Republic; rather, they favored a plebiscitary republic in which the executive power would be significantly stronger and the legislative branch would be stripped of much of its power. Finally Harris describes both the intense friendships that developed over the Dreyfus Affair, and the personal ruptures that ensued when longstanding friends ended up in opposing camps. She also shows how these bonds of solidarity on both sides of the

divide were sustained not only by social networks within universities, but especially by the leading salons of the time.

All of this information is fascinating, and Harris is to be commended for providing insight into this personal dimension of the Dreyfus Affair. Where she gets into trouble, however, is in her desire to break down the dichotomy between the Dreyfusards and the anti-Dreyfusards, and especially in her desire to cut the Dreyfusards down to size. In her analysis of this private correspondence, she notices that in terms of style, if not always substance, there were remarkable similarities between the rhetoric deployed by two camps. Both sides, for example, viewed their opponents in conspiratorial terms. While the anti-Dreyfusards raised the spectre of the Jewish-Protestant-Masonic Syndicate, the Dreyfusards were obsessed with the Jesuit-military conspiracy. In addition, the rhetoric of both sides was suffused with religious imagery. In hundreds of letters sent to Lucie Dreyfus, including many from Christians, Dreyfus was described as a Christ-like martyr; indeed, Lucie herself used this language. By the same token, the anti-Dreyfusards depicted Colonel Henry (he had since been promoted) as a "martyr" after he committed suicide in prison following his arrest for having forged documents in Dreyfus's dossier. Harris furthermore notes that even many Dreyfusards were antisemitic, including Auguste Scheurer-Kestner, the president of the Senate, who at one point warned Joseph Reinach not to "jewify" the Dreyfusard campaign, and especially Colonel Picquart (p. 97). Above all, she argues, the Dreyfusards were swayed by passion and emotion no less than their opponents, despite their claim to be the standard bearers of rationalism and enlightenment values. Indeed, Harris suggests, longstanding animosities and political sympathies, rather than reason and judicial impartiality, ultimately determined which camp one supported. As proof of how irrational even the leading Dreyfusards were, Harris cites the fact that Mathieu Dreyfus consulted a well known psychic.

While it is true that the rhetoric of the Dreyfusards was infused with emotion and passion, that does not mean that the decision to support the cause of revision--the demand for a new trial--was motivated by irrational instincts rather than reason and a studied analysis of the evidence. Indeed, how else can we explain why so few of those who ultimately joined the Dreyfusard camp questioned the original verdict? In truth, it was only after the evidence was presented by Lazare, Zola, and the socialist leader Jean Jaurès that the vast majority of the public made up its mind.[5]

Moreover, in her effort to prove that the Dreyfusards were just as irrational and emotional as the anti-Dreyfusards, Harris goes too far in minimizing the threat posed by the right. In particular, she severely underestimates the strength of the right-wing leagues. To cite but one example, her figures on the size of the Ligue antisémitique française (LAF), led by Jules Guérin, cannot possibly be correct. She claims that the LAF and the Jeunesse antisémitique combined numbered only 1,500, but according to Stephen Wilson, who has combed every archive on this subject, the police estimated the size of the LAF in July 1898 at 11,000 and at 5,000 in August 1899. Acknowledging that these figures may be exaggerated, Wilson whittles this estimate down to 5,000-10,000, still a far cry from 1,500.[6] Furthermore, as any student of the far right knows, the size of individual leagues is less important than the coalitions that were formed. For example, abbé Théodore Garnier's Catholic nationalist league, the Union Nationale, whose significance Harris dismisses altogether, was estimated by police to number as many as 20,000 individuals nationwide, and the police viewed this organization as a serious threat since it worked hand in hand with the LAF.[7] Moreover, in an attempt to diminish the significance of antisemitism, Harris repeats a claim frequently made by conservative historians that the Henry Memorial, a fund raising campaign launched in the pages of the *Libre parole* to assist "the widow and orphan of Colonel Henry against the Jew Reinach," was anti-Dreyfusard but not explicitly antisemitic. But aside from the blatantly antisemitic way this campaign was pitched, even a cursory glance at the comments that accompanied the contributions reveals a deep-seated antisemitic animosity. The abbé Léon Cros, for example, remarked that he would like nothing better than "a bedside rug, made of Yid-skin, that I could trample first thing in the morning and last thing at night," and another contributor wrote "Finding not enough Jews to massacre, I propose cutting them in two, in order to get twice as many." [8]

In addition, although Harris claims that Dreyfusard fears of some sort of clerical plot to undermine the republic were overblown, there were solid grounds for suspicion. As she herself shows, Drumont remained on intimate terms with Père Stanislas du Lac, the head of the Jesuit order in France, and Père du Lac was close to several of the top ranking generals; indeed, he even served as confessor to General Charles le Mouton de du Boisdeffre. Moreover, the Paris police strongly suspected that the *Libre parole* was financed by the Jesuits.[9] Many also considered it suspicious that news of Dreyfus's arrest had instantly been leaked to Drumont, and it was striking that next to the *Libre parole*, the Catholic press was most vociferous in demanding the imposition of the death penalty.[10]

Finally, Harris downplays the role of Catholics in the anti-Dreyfusard coalition by arguing that Catholic opinion was in reality more fractured and diverse than generally believed. While it is true that there was a tiny group of Catholic Dreyfusards, who numbered no more than about 200, not a single French bishop spoke out in favor of revision, even after Henry's suicide, an event that sent a clear message to anyone who still harbored doubts that something was terribly amiss in the army's case. Even the Catholic deputy Albert de Mun, whose more moderate form of antisemitism Harris contrasts to that of the Assumptionists, continued to insist on Dreyfus's guilt in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Whether there was actually a conspiracy between Catholic groups and the military remains an open question, but the prominent role of Catholics in the anti-Dreyfusard coalition, including a large number of priests, cannot be ignored.

By bending over backward to minimize the threat from the right, and especially from Catholics, Harris insinuates that the crackdown on unauthorized religious orders after 1899 was unconnected to their behavior during the Affair. It is true that most Catholic organizations, including the Assumptionists and the Union Nationale, pulled back from the brink in 1898-99 and urged their members, and especially their youth groups, not to engage in antisemitic violence. Nonetheless, the rhetorical war against the Jews in the Catholic press did not cease; if anything, it became even more strident as the anti-Dreyfusards realized that they were losing the battle. Even the Pope expressed concern over this issue, since he feared an anti-Catholic backlash. In 1899 the Vatican reminded French Catholics that it was "not permitted to exterminate the Jewish race," and it directed the French clergy not to allow themselves to be swept up by violent and intemperate political movements.[11] Moreover, the Sûreté Générale suspected that Père Bailly had lent support to Déroulède's attempted coup in 1899, although in reality Bailly had decided against participating in this venture.[12]

While it may be true that putting the Assumptionists on trial and dissolving the congregation in France was an extreme measure, it was not altogether unjustified. Many Catholic Dreyfusards, including Harris's hero, the abbé Joseph Bruguerette, also felt that the Assumptionists had gone too far in meddling in politics, and even the Vatican seemed willing to sacrifice the Assumptionists in the hope of staving off more far-reaching anticlerical measures. Furthermore, the religious orders that were ultimately expelled had never been authorized to operate in France, despite the fact that they had been tolerated for decades. It is therefore not surprising that their prominent role in anti-Dreyfusard agitation led to a reconsideration of their legal status. Finally, many Dreyfusards, including Bernard Lazare, did not support Prime Minister Emile Combes's radical anticlerical crackdown. But in truth, the battle over how far to pursue anticlericalism was one that had divided factions on the left since the 1880s. Liberals, including many Jews, who desired a continued role for religion in public life, were pitted against free thinkers, who wanted to eliminate religion altogether from the public sphere. For those Radical Socialists and Socialists who pursued the anticlerical campaign, the crackdown on the religious congregations, which led to separation of church and state in 1905, was not a betrayal of their tolerant and pluralistic values, as Harris claims. Rather, they had never held those values in the first place.

All this is to say that there is much of value in Harris's book, especially insofar as she fleshes out the personal relationships among many of the key players. She also helps restore Dreyfus's humanity,

which she correctly points out many of his most ardent supporters cared little about in their zeal to push for a complete judicial exoneration as opposed to accepting the government's offer of a pardon. Had this strategy been pursued, it would have entailed reimprisonment for Dreyfus and another long-drawn out legal battle, something Dreyfus's family believed he could not endure either physically or emotionally. Still, notwithstanding its many achievements, the book is marred by this heavy-handed thesis, which veers dangerously close to offering an apology for the anti-Dreyfusard right. (Harris even goes so far as to pin the blame for the army's refusal to back down primarily on the Dreyfusards. As she oddly comments, Zola's "tendency to demonize helped to destroy any possibility of compromise" [p. 113].) In the end, Harris would have been well advised to have refrained from browbeating her readers with this unconvincing thesis and by allowing the rich personal correspondence she has so tirelessly collected speak for itself.

## Notes

[1] Michael Burns, *Dreyfus: A Family Affair, 1789-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

[2] Louis Snyder, ed., *The Dreyfus Case: A Documentary History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1973), pp. 18-20; Michael Burns, *France and the Dreyfus Affair: A Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), p. 32; Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York, George Braziller, 1986), pp. 75-76.

[3] Vicki Caron, *Between France and Germany: The Jews of Alsace-Lorraine, 1871-1918* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), esp. ch. 6, pp. 118-135; Vicki Caron and Paula Hyman, "The Failed Alliance: Jewish-Catholic Relations in Alsace-Lorraine, 1871-1914," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 26 (1981), pp. 3-21.

[4] Harris has apparently borrowed this term from the French historian Vincent Duclert. See Vincent Duclert, "Anti-intellectualisme et intellectuels pendant l'affaire Dreyfus," *Mil neuf cent* 15, no. 15 (1997), pp. 69-83. For a recent study of "intellectuals" during the Dreyfus Affair, see Venita Datta, *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

[5] As is well known, even as late as early January 1898, Jaurès had not yet made up his mind regarding Dreyfus's guilt or innocence. On the impact of the writings of Lazare, Zola, and Jaurès in awakening public opinion, see Paula E. Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 102-105; Burns, *France and the Dreyfus Affair*, pp. 74-80, 84-112, 118-122; and Bredin, *The Affair*, pp. 134-40, 245-257, 313-316.

[6] Stephen Wilson, *Ideology and Experience: Antisemitism in France at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), p. 188. Harris (p. 297) also claims that the "tiny" figures of the LAF in France contrasted sharply with the hundreds of thousands of members in antisemitic leagues in Romania, Russia, Germany, and Austria. But in reality, nowhere in Europe did any single antisemitic league have hundreds of thousands of members.

[7] Harris (p. 434, n. 17) claims she found only one small file on the Union Nationale--Archives Nationales (AN) F<sup>7</sup> 12459. In reality, however, the police collected a huge amount of material on this organization. In addition to this file, which deals with nationalist movements in general, there are two other files at the AN specifically on Garnier and the Union Nationale: AN F<sup>7</sup> 15959:1 and AN F<sup>7</sup> 12480. There are another three huge files at the Archives of the Paris Police (APP) BA 1537, 1538, and 1539. On the Union Nationale, see Stephen Wilson, "Catholic Populism in France at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair: The Union Nationale," *Journal of Contemporary History* 10, no. 4 (Oct. 1975), pp. 667-

---

705; Vicki Caron, "Catholic Political Mobilization and Antisemitic Violence in fin-de-siècle France: The Case of the Union Nationale," *Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 2 (June 2009), pp. 294-346.

[8] Maurice Larkin, *Church and State after the Dreyfus Affair: The Separation Issue in France* (London: MacMillan, 1974), p. 72; Caron, "Catholic Political Mobilization," p. 340; Burns, *France and the Dreyfus Affair*, pp. 130-131.

[9] AN F<sup>7</sup> 15951-2, Sûreté générale rept., May 29, 1895.

[10] See for eg., Théodore Garnier, "Le Traître Dreyfus," *Le Peuple Français*, Nov. 2, 1894, p. 2; Garnier, "Jetez-les dehors!" *Le Peuple Français*, Jan. 5, 1895, p. 1.

[11] Caron, "Catholic Political Mobilization," p. 326, n. 124.

[12] Maurice Larkin, *Religion, Politics and Preferment in France since 1890: La Belle Époque and its Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 23-24; and Larkin, *Church and State*, pp. 77-79.

Vicki Caron  
Cornell University  
vc21@cornell.edu

Copyright © 2011 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

ISSN 1557-7058

*H-France Forum*, Volume 6, Issue 3 (Fall 2011), No. 3