



School of Law  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Digital Commons @ University of Georgia  
School of Law

---

Popular Media

Faculty Scholarship

---

10-1-1994

## Dreyfus Case Began Century Ago

Donald E. Wilkes Jr.

*University of Georgia School of Law, wilkes@uga.edu*

---

### Repository Citation

Wilkes, Donald E. Jr., "Dreyfus Case Began Century Ago" (1994). *Popular Media*. 28.  
[https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/fac\\_pm/28](https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/fac_pm/28)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Digital Commons @ University of Georgia School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Popular Media by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of Georgia School of Law. [Please share how you have benefited from this access](#)  
For more information, please contact [tstriepe@uga.edu](mailto:tstriepe@uga.edu).

# DREYFUS CASE BEGAN CENTURY AGO

Published in the Georgia Advocate, p. 29 (Fall 1994).

Imagine the scene. It is 100 years ago, Monday, Oct. 15, 1894, in Paris, France. The Dreyfus case--the most notorious frameup of the 19th century, one of the most incredible episodes in criminal jurisprudence, and an important chapter in the history of antisemitism--is about to commence. It is 8 in the morning. Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, a 35-year old Jewish officer in the French army, is kissing his wife and two children goodbye in their apartment on Avenue du Trocadero (now Avenue du President Wilson) and about to begin the half-hour walk to army headquarters on Rue St. Dominique, where he is due to report at 9:00 a.m. As Dreyfus exits his apartment, neither he nor his family realizes that he is heading towards disaster, that it will be nearly five years before he returns home again.

Dreyfus arrived at army headquarters on time that memorable morning. When he entered, he was immediately arrested on a charge of treason for allegedly having delivered military secrets to Germany. Completely innocent of any crime, Dreyfus protested the arrest, but to no avail. He was hurried off to secret confinement in a military prison.

Dreyfus was tried behind closed doors by a military tribunal in December 1894. The only physical evidence against him was the infamous bordereau, a handwritten memorandum stolen from the German embassy in Paris by a French intelligence agent a few weeks before Dreyfus's arrest. Obviously written by a French army officer, this treasonable paper enumerated and explained certain documents containing military secrets which the officer had delivered to the Germans along with the bordereau itself.

Although Dreyfus's handwriting was different from that on the bordereau, several "handwriting experts" testified that Dreyfus had written the bordereau. Nevertheless, the evidence of Dreyfus's guilt was so weak that he probably would have been acquitted. After the tribunal had retired to consider its verdict, however, the intelligence section of the army, acting with the connivance of the army General Staff, secretly transmitted to the trial judges a packet of documents which appeared to incriminate Dreyfus but actually,

unknown to the judges, consisted of forged or misleading documents. Neither Dreyfus nor his lawyer knew of the existence of the secret dossier. After perusing the secret dossier, the tribunal convicted Dreyfus of treason and sentenced him to imprisonment for life.

On Jan. 5, 1895, in a bizarre military ceremony conducted in the main courtyard of the Military College in the presence of hundreds of troops, Dreyfus was formally degraded and expelled from the army. His insignia, decorations, and ribbons were torn from his uniform, and his sword broken in two before his eyes. During the ceremony a mob watching from outside the courtyard gates screamed antisemitic epithets at Dreyfus, who several times shouted out that he was innocent. The next month Dreyfus was transported to Devil's Island, off the coast of South America, where he arrived in April 1895. Here, weakened by inadequate nutrition and primitive living conditions, racked by the tropical heat and humidity, attacked by diseases, fevers and insects, confused and crushed by his horrific misfortune, Dreyfus was to spend four wretched years in solitary close confinement, his only consolation being a few books to read and his correspondence with his beloved, devoted wife Lucie.

The truth about the Dreyfus case--namely, that he was innocent, that he had been framed, and that the bordereau had been written by someone else--emerged slowly, but by 1898 the case had become not only a French national scandal but an international cause celebre, and there was a widespread, growing realization that a grave miscarriage of justice likely had occurred, although many rightists and antisemites continued to maintain Dreyfus's guilt. Two prominent Dreyfusards (as the defenders of Dreyfus came to be called) were more responsible than anyone else for the gradual emergence of the truth.

The first was the superbly capable and diligent Lt.-Col. Georges Picquart, the man of honor, who took over the French army's intelligence section in 1895 and soon discovered that the bordereau had been written by an infantry officer, Commandant Esterhazy, and that Esterhazy was the traitor who had committed the crime for which Dreyfus had been convicted. When Picquart brought this information to the attention of his superiors and tried to arrange the arrest of Esterhazy and the exoneration of Dreyfus, he was reprimanded, given token assignments in faraway lands, disciplined, charged with crime, imprisoned, and expelled from the army for "grave misdeeds while in service"! The other leader of the march toward the truth was the celebrated novelist, Emile Zola, whose famous "I Accuse" letter to the president of France, published in a Paris newspaper on January 13, 1898, was a dramatic expose of the machinations against Dreyfus and Picquart. For his heroic efforts in behalf of truth and

justice, Zola was convicted of criminal libel and forced to spend a year in exile in England.

Despite a massive, prolonged coverup by General Staff and army intelligence officers--a coverup that featured lies, perjury, obstruction of justice, repeated falsifications of documents, and despicable appeals to antisemitism and chauvinism--Dreyfus's 1894 conviction was set aside by a civilian court in June 1899, and he was brought back to France later that month. On September 9, after a month-long retrial at which the prosecution proffered perjury and false evidence, Dreyfus was--to the astonishment of the civilized world--again convicted of treason by a military tribunal. Ten days later--after a worldwide firestorm of anger, protests, and demonstrations--he was pardoned by the president of France, and released.

Seven years later Dreyfus was officially exonerated. On July 12, 1906 the highest court in France set aside the 1899 conviction and declared Dreyfus innocent. The next day the French legislature passed laws restoring both Dreyfus and Picquart to the army and making Picquart a general. Eight days later, in a moving ceremony in a courtyard adjoining the one where he had been degraded nearly twelve years earlier, Dreyfus was honorably restored to French army and given the medal of the Legion of Honor while his wife and children and Gen. Picquart watched.

The generals and officers who had persecuted Dreyfus were never punished. Neither was Esterhazy, who was allowed to flee the country and died in exile in England.

Promoted to Commandant during World War I, Alfred Dreyfus served honorably in combat and then retired from the military. He died in 1935, two days before Bastille Day.