

"J'ACCUSE ...!" EMILE ZOLA,
ALFRED DREYFUS,
AND
THE GREATEST NEWSPAPER
ARTICLE IN HISTORY

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Last month marked the centennial anniversary of the greatest newspaper article of all time. Strangely, the American print and broadcast media barely mentioned the article or its importance or the astonishing story surrounding it.

The article, by Emile Zola, the great French novelist, appeared in a Paris literary newspaper, L'Aurore (The Dawn) on Thursday, Jan. 13, 1898, "an essential date in the history of journalism," according to historian Jean-Denis Bredin. Written in the form of an open letter to the President of France, the 4,000 word article, entitled J'Accuse! (I Accuse!), rightly has been judged a "masterpiece" of polemics and a literary achievement "of imperishable beauty." No other newspaper article has ever provoked such public debate and controversy or had such an impact on law, justice, and society.

The appearance of Zola's article was the greatest day of the Dreyfus Affair, which tormented France for twelve years. The Affair, "one of the great commotions of history," in the words of historian Barbara W. Tuchman, arose out of the 1894 arrest and conviction for treason of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer in the French army. Dreyfus, who was completely innocent, received an unfair trial at his court martial; the prosecution's case had no substance, and the conviction was based on false, supposedly incriminating documents, not introduced into evidence or disclosed to Dreyfus, which were secretly delivered to the trial judges after they had retired to consider their verdict. Dreyfus was sentenced to life imprisonment and expelled from the army. He was incarcerated off the coast of South America on Devil's Island from 1895 until 1899.

At the time of the arrest and trial the army officers responsible for the prosecution truly believed Dreyfus was guilty of the crime charged. By 1896,

however, they knew they had made a catastrophic mistake. Nevertheless, high-ranking officers on the army's General Staff and officers in military intelligence, fearful that public exposure of the injustice done Dreyfus would embarrass the army, engaged in a gigantic coverup which featured perjury, forgery, and obstruction of justice. The conspirators, including at least eight generals, even protected and assisted Commandant Ferdinand Esterhazy, the army infantry officer who, as they knew by 1896, had actually committed the crime for which Dreyfus had been wrongfully convicted.

Zola's *J'Accuse!* article was published two days after another court martial had, as part of the coverup, acquitted Esterhazy of the treasonous offense of which Esterhazy was clearly guilty and for which Dreyfus was being unjustly punished.

The article gave a detailed explanation of how it had happened that Dreyfus had been convicted of a crime he never committed; showed that the real culprit was Esterhazy and blasted his acquittal; revealed the immensity of the coverup; named the officers known by Zola to have been involved in perpetrating the coverup, and accused them of "one of the greatest iniquities of the century;" accused the tribunal that convicted Dreyfus of "condemning an accused person on the strength of a secret document"; and accused the tribunal which had found Esterhazy not guilty of having, "in obedience to orders, ... knowingly acquitt[ed] a guilty man."

Written in sparkling and mellifluous prose, imbued with a tone of outrage, the article contains many beautiful sentences and phrases. The most memorable: "*la verite est en marche et rien ne l'arretera*" (truth is on the march and nothing can stop it).

Zola had two purposes in mind when he wrote his article. First, he hoped to provide the public with a succinct overview of the facts of the Dreyfus case and thereby mobilize public opinion in Dreyfus's favor. Second, he hoped to provoke authorities into criminally prosecuting him for having written the article, so that at his trial new evidence could be produced and made public concerning Dreyfus's innocence and Esterhazy's guilt.

Zola succeeded in both his objectives. As one historian puts it, "Zola ... achieved a miracle."

The *J'Accuse!* article was an instant sensation, electrifying France and stimulating a gradual but inexorable shift in public opinion in favor of Dreyfus. It also brought the Dreyfus case worldwide attention; a respected writer of

international renown had accused the French military of enormous wrongs. From then on, the entire civilized world marveled at the French spectacle, with very few people outside France believing that Dreyfus was guilty.

Less than three weeks after his article was published Zola was put on trial on a charge of criminal libel. The accusatory instrument filed by prosecutors focused on only one sentence of Zola's article, wherein he had asserted that the tribunal that found Esterhazy not guilty had known he was guilty and had acquitted him on command. The charges plainly were an attempt by the government, spurred on by the military, to silence a heroic man who was bravely laboring to undo a hideous miscarriage of justice. As the amazed London Times noted: "Zola's true crime has been in daring to rise to defend the truth and civil liberty ... [and] for that courageous defense of the primordial rights of the citizen, he will be honored wherever men have souls that are free ..."

Hundreds of reporters from all over the world covered Zola's criminal trial, which lasted two weeks and occurred in a circus-like atmosphere. The trial judges treated Zola and his attorney shabbily; confusion, disorder, and even fistfights reigned supreme in the courtroom; howling crowds jeered Zola in court and tried to attack him as he left the courthouse under police protection; and at night antisemitic mobs carrying signs saying "Death to Zola" or "Down with the Jews" would smash the windows of Jewish-owned shops in Paris.

Even though the evidence introduced at the trial by the defense made it obvious that Esterhazy, not Dreyfus, was the traitor, and that the military was covering up the truth, Zola was convicted and sentenced to the maximum penalty of a year in jail. To avoid prison, Zola fled to England and lived in exile near London for almost a year. He returned to France in June 1899, shortly after an appellate court reversed Dreyfus' conviction and ordered Dreyfus retried. By then public opinion in France had swung decisively in favor of Dreyfus, and the libel charge against Zola was dismissed. Zola was no longer in jeopardy of confinement for writing history's greatest newspaper article, but his support of Dreyfus had left him financially ruined.

Dreyfus's 1899 retrial, also covered by numerous reporters and watched by the whole Western World, resulted, absurdly, in Dreyfus being reconvicted. Dreyfus was, however, quickly pardoned and released from custody. In 1906 Dreyfus's 1899 conviction was reversed by the highest court in France and he was formally adjudged innocent, whereupon he was reinstated in the army, promoted, and awarded the Legion of Honor. None of the coverup conspirators was ever criminally punished.

The Dreyfus Affair officially concluded on July 21, 1906 when Dreyfus was honored by a dress parade military ceremony. Zola was absent. He had died in 1902 in his Paris home, asphyxiated by fumes from a fireplace. Many historians believe he was murdered by right-wing extremists who, hating him for defending Dreyfus, stopped up his chimney.

Dreyfus attended Zola's burial services at Paris's Montmartre Cemetery where Anatole France delivered a famous eulogy:

"Given the obligation which befalls me to recall the struggle waged by Zola on behalf of truth and justice, is it possible for me to remain silent concerning those men so passionately bent on destroying an innocent man? ... How might I remove them from your sight when it is mine to show you Zola rising up, weak and unarmed, before them? ...

"Let us envy [Zola]: he has honored his country and the world with an immense body of work and a great deed ... [H]is destiny and his courage combined to endow him with the greatest of fates. He was a moment in the conscience of humanity."

On June 4, 1908 Zola's remains were transferred to the Pantheon, where France's greatest citizens are interred. Dreyfus attended the solemn ceremony. During the proceedings a right-wing journalist named Gregori pulled out a revolver and fired two shots at Dreyfus, slightly wounding him in the arm. Right-wing newspapers praised the attempted murder as a "gesture for France"! Put on trial for shooting Dreyfus, Gregori was acquitted!