

Theodor Herzl *The Dreyfus Affair* Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question: What was the impact of the Dreyfus Affair on Herzl's thinking?

Materials:

- The Dreyfus Affair PowerPoint
- *The Dreyfus Affair* Video
- Copies of *Documents A, B, C, D, E, F and G.*

Plan of Instruction:

The PowerPoint, video and supporting documents reinforce lesson content through purposeful repetition and the gradual addition of new material.

1. Pass out Documents A, B C, D, E, F, G.
2. Mini-lecture with PowerPoint:
 - Slide: Military Secrets. The Dreyfus Affair begins in 1894 when a French cleaning lady steals a torn-up letter from the waste-paper basket of the German military attaché, Colonel Maximilian von Schwartzkoppen, and turns it over to her real employer, French military intelligence. The paper, easily put together, is a bordereau, or memorandum, containing French military secrets. The French realize there is a spy in their midst.
 - Slide: Capt. Alfred Dreyfus: The French military settles on Captain Alfred Dreyfus as the culprit, in large part because he is a Jew. While Jews are allowed in the French military and given high positions, there is at the same time open anti-Semitism in the French officer corps. Documentation is forged and Dreyfus is declared guilty of treason in December 1894.
 - Slide: Degradation: *On January 5, 1895, his degradation takes place in public in the courtyard of the Ecole Militaire, a military school and training facility in Paris. His epaulettes are torn from his shoulders, the red stripes are ripped from his trousers and his sabre is broken in two.*
 - Slide: A Mort Les Juifs!: *“Death to the Jews!” The crowd yells. Theodor Herzl is there, covering the event for his newspaper, the Neue Freie Presse. What? He says to himself. Death to all Jews because of this one Jew?*
 - Slide: Devil's Island: *Dreyfus is sent to Devil's Island, a desolate island off the coast of French Guyana. He is shackled to his bed in tropical heat. His guards are forbidden to talk to him. His diet is rancid pork and other*

scraps. He becomes emaciated and his teeth rot in his mouth. He practically loses the power of speech. It is likely he is not meant to survive.

- Slide: A Psychological Impossibility: *Theodor Herzl doubts the guilt of the accused very early on. He believes it's a psychological impossibility that Dreyfus, a French patriot who is financially well off and rising in the ranks, would commit treason. Herzl says: "A Jew who, as an officer on the general staff, has before him an honorable career, cannot commit such a crime..."*
- Slide: Austrian Antisemitism: *On April 2, 1895, almost exactly three months after the trial, in Herzl's hometown of Vienna, elections bring to power an anti-Semitic party led by Karl Lueger, who eventually goes on to become Vienna's mayor. Herzl observes these events from Paris. Some historians argue that events in Herzl's hometown had even more of an impact on his thinking than did the Dreyfus Affair.*
- Slide: The Jewish State: *In May, 1895, Herzl writes what becomes his greatest work "The Jewish State" in which he sets down his plan for the answer to antisemitism – Jewish statehood. He has come to believe this is not just a solution but the only solution to antisemitism in Europe. The book is published on February 14, 1896.*
- Slide: Georges Picquart: *The Dreyfus Affair returns to the spotlight when, in 1896, a French officer, Georges Picquart, who is not Jewish, discovers the identity of the real spy when he is put in charge of investigating continuing leaks. Picquart learns the actual spy is another French officer by the name of Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy. When Picquart brings this to the attention of his commanding officers they attempt to silence him. Picquart courageously refuses to be silenced. The military then sends him to French Tunisia to prevent him from embarrassing the Army's high command, which is responsible for falsely accusing Dreyfus.*
- Slide: Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy: *The real spy is a reprobate mired in gambling debts, dissatisfied with his army career and who feels overlooked for promotions.*
- Slide: Esterhazy Trial. *Pressure from Dreyfus' family and others forces the French military to take Esterhazy into custody on January 9, 1898. The trial is held in closed session and he is quickly acquitted. Ironically, Colonel Picquart, a witness at the trial, is indicted for revealing military secrets to civilians and is put under arrest at a military prison.*
- Slide: J'Accuse: *The trial, an obvious sham, is too much for Emile Zola, famous French writer. He publishes J'Accuse in a French newspaper,*

accusing the French military of being responsible for a cover-up. A special edition of 300,000 copies is printed on January 13, 1898. Bands of youths are sent through the streets to sell it. A historian describes it as “one of the greatest journalistic events of the nineteenth century.”

- Slide: France Divided: *It becomes clear to growing numbers that something is very wrong with the Dreyfus verdict. France is split over the issue into two camps: the Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards. The Dreyfus Affair divides friends and families and will engulf France for years.*
- Slide: Retrial: *In an effort to bring the Affair to some kind of conclusion, Dreyfus is brought back from Devil’s Island in 1899 and re-tried. The Dreyfusards are certain he will be found innocent. But instead the military judges again find him guilty, outraging international opinion. A new French premier intervenes to calm tensions and issues a pardon. But the guilty verdict still stands. Only in 1906 is Dreyfus finally reinstated as an artillery officer.*
- Slide: It Made Me a Zionist: For Theodor Herzl, the Dreyfus Affair was a watershed. He would say it’s what made him a Zionist, signifying for him that it was impossible for Jews to win full acceptance in Europe. He wrote in 1899: “The Dreyfus case embodies more than a judicial error; it embodies the desire of the vast majority of the French to condemn a Jew Death to the Jews! howled the mob ... Where? In France. In republican, modern, civilized France. when a people which in every other respect is so progressive and so highly civilized can take such a turn, what are we to expect from other peoples, which have not even attained the level which France attained a hundred years ago?”

3. Play video: The Dreyfus Affair

Introduce inquiry question: What was the impact of the Dreyfus Affair on Herzl’s thinking?

4. Whole class discussion:

- The Dreyfus Affair captured the interest of France for years, almost to the exclusion of all else. Why do you think that was?
- The Jewish population of France was tiny at the time of the Dreyfus Affair – some 71,000 in a population of 38 million in 1897. What then explains the pervasive anti-Semitism among the French?
- The Dreyfus Affair is generally thought to be the catalyst that turned Herzl into a Zionist. But some historians think that antisemitism in his home state of Austria had a deeper impact on Herzl’s thinking. What is your opinion?

- Do you think Herzl would have written *The Jewish State* without the Dreyfus Affair?

5. Hand out Review Questions (may be used as end of class Quiz).

**Document A: “*Neue Freie Presse*”, Theodor Herzl
(Jan. 5, 1895)**

On this dismal winter’s day the degradation of Captain Dreyfus, which was carried out in the grounds of the Military Academy, drew large numbers of the curious to the vicinity. Many officers were present, not a few of them accompanied by ladies. Entry into the grounds of the *Ecole Militaire* was permitted only to army officers and some journalists. Outside the grounds swarmed the morbid crowds which are always attracted by executions. A considerable number of police were on duty. At nine o’clock the great open court was filled with a detachment of troops in square formation: five thousand men in all. In the center a general sat on horseback. A few minutes after nine Dreyfus was led forth. He was dressed in his captain’s uniform. Four men conducted him before the general. The latter said: “Alfred Dreyfus, you are unworthy to bear arms. In the name of the French Republic I degrade you from your rank. Let the sentence be carried out.” Here Dreyfus lifted his right arm and called out: “I declare and solemnly swear that you are degrading an innocent man. Vive la France!” At that instant the drums were beaten. The officer in charge began to tear from the condemned man’s uniform the buttons and cords, which had already been loosened. Dreyfus retained his calm bearing. Within a few minutes this part of the ceremony was over.

Then began the parade of the condemned before the troops. Dreyfus marched along the sides of the square like a man who knows himself to be innocent. He passed by a group of officers, who cried: “Judas! Traitor!” Dreyfus cried back: “I forbid you to insult me!” ...

When he had been led away the troops defiled off the grounds. But the crowd surged toward the gates to watch the condemned man being led away. There were passionate shouts. “Bring him out here, and we’ll tear him to pieces!” But the crowd watched in vain. There was a curious excitement amongst those who had been able to witness the ceremony of the degradation. The strange, firm bearing of the prisoner had made a profound impression on some of them.

Source: A Quoted In: “Theodor Herzl: A Biography”, Alex Bein, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1941, p. 112-114.

**Document B: “Theodor Herzl”, Alex Bein
(Jan. 5, 1895)**

Later in the day Herzl sent off a supplementary report which appeared in the Sunday edition of his paper:

To complete the picture of the ceremony it should be added that as Dreyfus was being paraded before the troops, among whom there were numbers of recruits, he kept calling out: ‘I am innocent!’ When he passed near a group of journalists he stopped for a moment and said: ‘Tell all France that I am innocent!’ Some of the journalists retorted with insults. Part of the crowd outside, which was able to catch a glimpse of the ceremony, shouted again and again: ‘Death to the traitor!’

It was indeed in a state “of curious excitement” that Herzl left the scene. What was it that moved him so? He was – as the tone of his report showed – becoming more and more convinced of the innocence of the condemned man. He had not the slightest external evidence on which to base this feeling; it was an insight born of his new understanding of the problem of the emancipated Jew. He did not believe that a Jewish officer was capable of committing an act of national treachery. “A Jew who, as an officer on the general staff, has before him an honorable career, cannot commit such a crime ... The Jews, who have so long been condemned to a state of civic dishonor, have, as a result, developed an almost pathological hunger for honor, and a Jewish officer is in this respect specifically Jewish.” That Captain Dreyfus, a well-to-do Jew who had been prompted to a military career by pure ambition, should have committed such a crime therefore seemed to Herzl a psychological impossibility.

Source: “Theodor Herzl: A Biography”, Alex Bein, *The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1941, p. 114-115.*

Document C: “Dreyfus”, Ruth Harris (2010)

Two Frances, or so it seemed, fought for the nation’s soul: the Dreyfusards, or revisionists, defended Truth and Justice by demanding a retrial; and the anti-Dreyfusards championed Tradition and Honour by insisting that the verdict of the original court martial stand. These anti-revisionists supported the military and scarcely cared whether or not Dreyfus was a traitor. They saw the call for Truth and Justice as a pretext for an assault on the army. The Dreyfusards, in contrast, perceived Tradition and Honour as code for the false values of clericalism and militarism.

Source: “Dreyfus”, Ruth Harris, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt & Company, New York, 2010, p. 3.

Document D: “Dreyfus”, Ruth Harris (2010)

[Ferdinand] Esterhazy’s life and character revealed almost a caricature of a *fin de siècle* villain. While Dreyfus had no obvious motive for treason, Esterhazy’s was all too clear. Born in 1847 in Paris with a distant link to ancient Hungarian nobility, he had progressed through the ranks despite absenteeism, dishonesty and being sent down from the military academy at St-Cyr. While Dreyfus’s ascent owed everything to meritocratic reform, Esterhazy’s had flourished through corruption and nepotism. In the 1870s he had set himself up in style, using an inheritance and the generosity of mistresses to cut a dash in the *cercles*, or clubs, where he associated with men much richer than himself. He added the title of count to his name and put on devil-may-care airs. But he was not unintelligent. He read widely, and was interested in aspects of his military career; during the Franco-Prussian War he had fought valiantly but felt for ever cheated of the rank that he believed his efforts merited.

After failing to win a post on the General Staff, he had worked in North Africa and married an aristocrat of moderate means. But he squandered this windfall through speculation and gambling, and turned to increasingly unsavoury expedients to supplement his dwindling income. ...

He tended to view those who opposed him as rascals or imbeciles, but disguised his opinions well. While his letters to Mme Gabrielle Boulancy, his last mistress, betrayed his contempt for his superiors and his disdain for the French, he was none the less able to win their sympathy and esteem for years. Their reports praised his judgement and the correctness of his private life. All his skill at deception, however, was not enough to keep him afloat financially, and as his fortunes deteriorated, he stooped to ever lower expedients, eventually justifying treason by casting himself as a victim of his military hierarchy. He went to [German military attaché, Colonel] Schwarzkoppen for the first time on 20 July 1894.

Source: “Dreyfus”, Ruth Harris, *Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt & Company, New York, 2010, p. 77-78.*

Document E: “Theodor Herzl”, Alex Bein (1934)

Four years afterwards there still rang in his ears the shouts of the crowd, which left him shattered: “*A mort! A mort les juifs!*” What! He asked himself. Death to all the Jews because *one* of them is a traitor? “The Dreyfus case,” he wrote in 1899, “embodies more than a judicial error; it embodies the desire of the vast majority of the French to condemn a Jew, and to condemn all Jews in this one Jew. Death to the Jews! howled the mob, as the decorations were being ripped from the captain’s coat ... Where? In France. In republican, modern, civilized France, a hundred years after the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The French people, or at any rate the greater part of the French people, does not want to extend the rights of man to Jews. The edict of the great Revolution has been revoked.”

Illumined thus in retrospect, the “curious excitement” which gripped Herzl on that occasion takes on a special significance. “Until that time most of us believed that the solution of the Jewish question was to be patiently waited for as part of the general development of mankind. But when a people which in every other respect is so progressive and so highly civilized can take such a turn, what are we to expect from other peoples, which have not even attained the level which France attained a hundred years ago?”

We need Herzl’s formulation of the situation as set down in 1899 in order to put his impressions of January 1895 in the proper light. In that fateful moment, when he heard the howling of the mob outside the gates of the Ecole Militaire, the realization flashed upon Herzl that Jew-hatred was deep-rooted in the heart of the people – so deep, indeed, that it was impossible to hope for its disappearance within a measurable period of time. Precisely because he had proclaimed, in the New Ghetto, the ideal of human reconciliation, and had taken the ultimate decision to stand by his Jewishness, the ghastly spectacle of that winter morning must have shaken him to the depths of his being. It was as if the ground had been cut away from under his feet. In this sense Herzl could say later the Dreyfus affair had made him a Zionist.

Source: “Theodor Herzl: A Biography”, Alex Bein, *The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1941, p. 115-116.*

**Document F: “Article in Zionistische Schriften”,
Theodor Herzl (1899)**

I was turned into a Zionist by the Dreyfus Case. Not the present one in Rennes [August 7 – September 19, 1899], but the original one in Paris, of which I was a witness in 1894. ... For the Jews there is no other help and salvation than to return to their own nationhood and settle in their own land and territory. That is what I wrote in my book *The Jewish State* in 1895 under the shattering impression of the first Dreyfus Case.

Source: As Quoted In: “Theodor Herzl’s Conversion to Zionism”, by Henry J. Cohn, Jewish Social Studies, Vol. 23, No. 2, April, 1970, p. 101-110. (First Published after Herzl’s death in Zionistische Schriften, 1920)

**Document G: “Theodor Herzl’s Conversion to Zionism”,
Henry J. Cohn, 1970**

While writing *The Jewish State* Herzl was above all concerned with the seriousness and pervasiveness of antisemitism. The question remains whether this was triggered off or heightened more by the Dreyfus Affair than by Herzl’s personal experience and knowledge of antisemitism in Vienna. The diaries at this time, while not mentioning Dreyfus, are more preoccupied with antisemitism in Vienna and Austria than in all other European countries put together. ...

The Jewish State, completed in manuscript by mid-January and first published on February 14, 1896, did not mention the Dreyfus case and described antisemitism in France as no more than a social irritant. ...

Herzl’s diaries for the next years, 1,630 printed pages in the full edition, mention Captain Dreyfus only 11 times. Seven of these are merely passing allusions, and the three fullest references to the Dreyfus case all bear out in various ways the interpretation advanced in this article. ...

Two years later [1897] in Vienna, Herzl commented on “the Dreyfus Affair, which, strangely enough, is active again at this particular time – just as it was three years ago when I was writing *The New Ghetto*.” Here surely was a time when one would have expected Herzl to describe the Dreyfus Affair as the catalyst which had induced him to write *The Jewish State*, but instead he associated it with a play for which, as we have seen, he had developed the central theme before there was a Dreyfus case. ...

Not Paris, but Vienna, as seen from Paris, provided the antisemitism which in 1895 injected urgency into the development of Herzl’s thoughts on the Jewish problem.

Source: “Theodor Herzl’s Conversion to Zionism”, Henry J. Cohn, *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April, 1970), pp. 101-110.

Review Questions

Name _____

1. Why did Herzl think Dreyfus was innocent before he had concrete evidence?

2. Why did the French military engage in cover-up after cover-up to hide the truth about Dreyfus' innocence?

3. *Close Reading (Document G):*
What is the author's evidence that anti-Semitism in Vienna and not the Dreyfus Affair has more impact on Herzl?

In the space below, using information from the documents and the film, answer the question: *What was the impact of the Dreyfus Affair on Herzl's thinking?*