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Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters
By Louis Begley
Yale University Press, 272 pages, $24.00.

Convicted in 1894 of selling secrets to Germany, French army captain Alfred Dreyfus, the only Jewish officer trainee on the General Staff, was sentenced to perpetual imprisonment in a fortified enclosure on Devil’s Island, a rocky formation near French Guyana. Six weeks before his exile began, as he cried out that he was innocent and a French patriot, Dreyfus was forced to participate in “the Judas parade,” marching around the courtyard while just outside, a huge mob screamed, “Death to the traitor, the dirty Jew.”

The Dreyfus case has become an iconic episode in the history of antisemitism. “Everything related to the affair,” including forged evidence, perjury and stone-walling at the highest levels of the French army, Louis Begley reminds us, was “envenomed” by the scapegoating of Jews that followed defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

Begley, novelist and lawyer, argues, clearly and compellingly, that America’s “own Devil’s Island” in Guantanamo — and the subordination of civil liberties to national security following September 11, 2001 — makes it imperative that the “crimes of the Bush Administration” do not disappear, as did the crimes against Dreyfus, “under the scar tissue of silence and indifference.”

When the targets of injustice are “outsiders,” Begley maintains, their guilt is almost always taken for granted. Dreyfus’s prosecutors had no sense of solidarity with him as a brother officer. And as newspapers implicated all Jews in treasonous activity, French Jews, desiring “above all else” to be French, were passive — or they embraced the conviction as “definitive and just.”

Dreyfus himself retained his confidence in the army, “unwilling to think that his being a Jew was relevant to his case.” He “lowered his head,” persisting in the belief that he would be protected by the republic that had granted him citizenship. Released after five years on Devil’s Island, though broken in body, he resumed active service in an artillery unit.

The heroes of “Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters” are whistleblowers. Émile Zola’s courage in delivering un coup de poing (a hard punch) by putting the case before the general public, in his masterpiece of political literature, “J’accuse,” Begley points out, “cannot be over-stated.” Then at the summit of his career, the novelist put at risk his election to the Académie Française, a distinction he coveted to accuse the highest authorities of mistreating someone he didn’t know, someone from a community he didn’t care for. Convicted of libel in a case brought by the minister of war, Zola was sentenced to a year in prison. He fled to London, and upon his return he narrowly escaped assassination.

Less celebrated, but equally courageous, according to Begley, was Georges Picquart, a lieutenant colonel who discovered that his colleagues in the army, some of whom knew that the traitor was, in fact, Charles Marie Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy, had forged the evidence against Dreyfus. The beneficiary of the cover-up that followed, Picquart was cashiered from the army, arrested and imprisoned.

Begley insists that the analogies between the abuses of power in the Dreyfus case and those of the Bush administration are “irresistible.” For example, both Dreyfus and Salim Ahmed Hamdan, a Guantanamo detainee were imprisoned based on secret evidence that neither they nor their counsel knew about or could challenge. And administration officials in France and the United States “re-defined” or ignored the law and immunized themselves from prosecution in the name of protecting national security.
These actions would not have been taken, Begley believes, if the accused were not outsiders. Much as French citizens concluded that Dreyfus was a traitor because he was a Jew, many Americans decided that those held in CIA jails “were terrorists because they were Muslims.” That’s the reason, Begley suggests, that a poll taken days after Barack Obama’s election to the presidency found that only 29% of Americans wanted to close the prison in Guantanamo.

Begley’s prose is taut and clear, but perhaps a bit too self-assured. He’s right to draw connections between French antisemitism in the early 20th century and American anti-Muslim sentiment. But he does not explore the differences adequately. After all, the September 11 provocation was not “treachery”; the Guantanamo prisoners are not American nationals, and the American press was, until recently, rather compliant.

Although they are invariably shown “hooded, in black goggles, kneeling in neat rows with their hands hand-cuffed behind their backs,” Begley wants us to remember that the abstract figures in orange jumpsuits are “real men,” innocent until proven guilty, waiting for 21st-century Zolas and Picquarts to rise up against “abuse wrapped in claims of expediency and reasons of state” and “redeem the honor” of their nation.

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