

# *J'accuse* (An Officer and a Spy): Roman Polanski's masterpiece on the Dreyfus Affair

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French-Polish director Roman Polanski's *J'accuse* (I Accuse—English title: *An Officer and a Spy*), released in theaters in France on November 13, is a powerful film recounting of the Dreyfus Affair—the historic, 12-year struggle to clear a French Jewish officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus (1859-1935), unjustly convicted of spying for Germany in 1894. The resulting exposure of criminal behavior implicating virtually the entire French general staff, backed by most of the political establishment, shook the French state to its foundations.

The 86-year-old Polanski's remarkable film career began more than 60 years ago, in the mid-1950s, with short films made in his native Poland. Some of his important feature films include *Knife in the Water* (1962), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Macbeth* (1971), *Chinatown* (1974), *Tess* (1979), *The Pianist* (2002), *Oliver Twist* (2005) and *The Ghost Writer* (2010). The new film is one of his most significant accomplishments.

Initially, Dreyfus' conviction, based on sloppy investigations and outright fabrication of evidence by anti-Semitic officers, went virtually unchallenged. The Dreyfus family and its few supporters met with claims, familiar to filmgoers today, that evidence could not be revealed to avoid exposing intelligence sources. Over the years, however, a stream of revelations made clear that a real spy was still at work, and that the conviction of Dreyfus and his solitary confinement on Devil's Island, the penal colony off the coast of French Guiana, was a horrific crime and fraud.

After years of deepening controversy, the scandal blew apart underlying tensions in French society. During and after the first re-trial of Dreyfus in 1899, governments feared collapse, and France teetered on the brink of civil war.

On the one hand, the *dreyfusards* invoked ideals of equality and justice proclaimed by the French Revolution. Émile Zola (1840-1902), the world-renowned French novelist and author of the celebrated 1885 novel *Germinal* (inspired by the 1884 Anzin coal miners' strike), drafted in 1898 his celebrated open letter to then-French President Félix Faure, *J'accuse*, published in *L'Aurore*. In the letter, Zola courageously accused by name top general staff officers and state officials of criminal behavior in framing Dreyfus and then covering up the army's misconduct.

Zola's work helped French Socialist leader Jean Jaurès overcome opposition from syndicalists in the socialist movement led by Jules Guesde, who dismissed the Dreyfus Affair as a mere fight within the officer corps and ignored the political issues involved. Jaurès went on to lead the French socialist movement in a campaign to clear Dreyfus.

On the other hand, the army, the Church and most of France's political parties defended the unjust verdict against Dreyfus. The *antidreyfusards* found their most ardent political and journalistic proponents in figures fusing French nationalism, monarchist opposition to the French Revolution, anti-Semitism, militarism and hatred of socialism. The archetype of these movements was the proto-fascistic *Action française*, founded in 1898 and led by Charles Maurras.

In the Dreyfus Affair, Leon Trotsky wrote in 1915, "there was summed

up and dramatized the fight against clericalism, against reaction, against parliamentary nepotism, against race hate and militarist hysteria, against backstage intrigues amongst the general staff, against the servility of the courts—against all the despicable forces that the powerful party of reaction could swing into motion to achieve its ends."

This gives extraordinary power to a film that dramatizes this great legal battle. Indeed, the Dreyfus Affair has already inspired or appeared in important films, including *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937, William Dieterle) with Paul Muni, and *I Accuse!* (1958) directed by and starring José Ferrer. Polanski's film has already won the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice International Film Festival this year, and actors in the film have been nominated for a number of awards.

As the script indicates in the harrowing first scene of the public degradation of Dreyfus (Louis Garrel), everything in the film is based on real events. Polanski's film not only recounts these events, moreover, but brings to life with extraordinary richness the world of 1890s France, and the courage and principle of those who struggled politically against the state to establish the truth.

The film centers on investigations carried out by Lieutenant-Colonel Georges Picquart (Jean Dujardin), who became head of military counterintelligence after the false conviction of Dreyfus. Over a number of months, Picquart assembled documents conclusively proving Dreyfus's innocence.

At the center of the conviction of Dreyfus was the charge that he had written the text of a *bordereau*, a list of military secrets, addressed by a spy to German military officers but which fell into French hands. Government experts admitted that Dreyfus's handwriting did not match that on the *bordereau* but dismissed this, claiming Dreyfus was masking his handwriting. This prompted Dreyfus to remark bitterly at trial that he was being convicted because his handwriting did not match that of the spy.

After the conviction of Dreyfus, however, Picquart discovered that the handwriting on the *bordereau* in fact belonged to another officer, Captain Ferdinand W. Esterhazy (Laurent Natrella), who continued spying for Germany until he finally had to flee to England in disgrace.

Determined to keep Dreyfus on Devil's Island, the general staff refused to admit its error, protected the spy Esterhazy and tried to discourage Picquart from continuing his investigation. Picquart refused and found himself the target of an unrelenting official campaign to silence him or ship him off to be killed on colonial battlefields. This convinced Picquart to overcome his deep misgivings as an officer about working outside official channels and to provide critical material to Zola (André Marcon) to draft *J'accuse*, published in *L'Aurore*.

By focusing on Picquart's investigation, Polanski accomplishes a remarkable feat: fitting into a coherent, two-hour narrative most of the key events in a complex scandal obscured by all manner of official lies, provocations and murders. The screenplay is remarkably concise, making effective use of text to help the filmgoer situate himself or herself in the

events and understand the large number of characters populating the drama.

The filmmakers have not only taken great pains to accurately recreate the look, feel and manners of the *Belle Époque* era, but used these elements to create a visually stunning film. This intensity and realism reinforce the drama of a film where most of the main characters find themselves in growing danger of assault, prison or murder.

Polanski's *J'accuse* benefits from wonderful acting that brings credibly to life all the many characters in this complex drama. Grégory Gadebois is excellent as the falsely jocular and deeply cynical Colonel Henry, who all but admitted to Picquart that he helped forge evidence against Dreyfus; conveniently for the army, Henry died in prison in an apparent suicide once his guilt was established.

Emmanuelle Seigner, who is also Polanski's wife, is remarkable as Pauline Monnier, whose extramarital affair with Picquart the army ends up exposing in an attempt to destroy him. In one moving scene after her husband (Luca Barbareschi) has confronted her and threatened her with divorce, she visits Picquart as he faces imminent arrest and decides she will stick by Picquart, despite the obvious risks.

Above all, Dujardin, normally a comic actor, gives an extraordinary performance as the straight-laced Picquart. A cultured man, who attended classical music concerts and met couriers giving him classified documents in front of statues at the Louvre, Picquart overcame the personal anti-Semitic prejudices he shared with virtually the entire officer corps, fighting with courage and principle. Hauled before the general staff and accused of abetting a Jewish plot to destroy Esterhazy, he told his superiors their investigation was a farce and walked out, slamming the door in their faces.

Perhaps the high point of the film is the publication of *J'accuse*, which Polanski uses to devastating effect in the film. For each officer accused by Zola, the corresponding actor reads Zola's accusation against him in *J'accuse* while the camera shows his character's anger and dismay at being accused in an article published in 300,000 copies—10 times *L'Aurore*'s normal print run.

The film follows events through the 1898 trial of Zola for defamation and Picquart's testimony at the 1899 re-trial—where the army, trying to calm mounting public outrage by reducing Dreyfus's sentence but without admitting to wrongdoing, arranged for the ludicrous and contemptible verdict of “guilty of high treason with attenuating circumstances.” Dreyfus was cleared in 1906, though the French army did not ultimately admit to having framed Dreyfus until 1995.

The making of such a film, which genuinely and artistically illuminates one of the great events of European history, is an immense achievement. In an era of mounting influence of far-right parties across Europe, including the relaunch of the *Action française* that now functions in the periphery of Marine Le Pen's National Rally, it requires not only integrity and skill, but intellectual courage. It is no exaggeration to say that this film is a masterpiece.

If there is one point that could perhaps be made, it is that while the film powerfully depicts the violent anti-Semitic mobs mobilized by the *antidreyfusards*, a casual filmgoer would have no idea of the mass *dreyfusard* support rallied by Zola and Jaurès. This is to some extent due to the film's focus on the 1894-1899 period. However, the socialist workers movement, which played a key role especially in the later years of the Dreyfus Affair, plays no role in the film. As a result, it can seem unclear how Zola, Picquart and their allies could defeat the army's *antidreyfusard* supporters, and why the army could not simply respond to Picquart's insubordination by locking him up.

This does not, however, detract from what the film has accomplished: bringing the Dreyfus Affair vividly and powerfully to life. This is a film that should and must be seen by people around the world, especially amid a new resurgence of neo-fascistic parties and officials across Europe and

internationally—from the fascistic rantings of the American president to the attempts in the German media to revise the history of Nazism in order to revive German militarism.

One scene at the beginning of the film in which Picquart receives secret files from his predecessor as head of military counterintelligence, Colonel Sandherr (Eric Ruf), is especially chilling. Dying of syphilis, Sandherr tells Picquart one file is critical—it has the list of thousands of political opponents to be rounded up and arrested to purify the nation in case of war. He adds that Jews should be rounded up, also.

Fascist rule and the Holocaust in France were largely the coming to power of the *antidreyfusards*. Maurras, who started out in journalism hailing Henry's false documents incriminating Dreyfus as “absolute truth,” ended as the godfather of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime, after the French army suddenly capitulated to the Nazis in 1940, in the first year of World War II. He was widely seen, correctly, as the intellectual inspiration for the entire fascist ruling clique around dictator Philippe Pétain.

*Action française* members who played key roles in the collaboration included Raphaël Alibert, Xavier Vallat and Louis Darquier, who oversaw various stages of Vichy's genocidal anti-Jewish policy; the infamous pro-Nazi propagandist Robert Brasillach; Vichy Finance Minister Pierre Bouthillier; and countless lower-ranking officials, thugs and murderers.

Significantly, when Maurras was sentenced to life in prison for high treason at the end of World War II and the fall of the fascist regime, he cried out: “This is the revenge of Dreyfus!”

Even so many decades later, none of the fundamental issues involved in the Dreyfus Affair have been resolved. Significantly, the right-wing hysterics of the #MeToo campaign, in contact with French President Emmanuel Macron's government and authorities in America, have launched a ferocious campaign against *J'accuse*, trying to prevent the showing of a film recounting one of the most critical battles in the history of the socialist movement. Disgracefully, the film has no distributor at this point in the US or the UK. The *World Socialist Web Site* will address the #MeToo witch hunt against *J'accuse* in further articles.

The history of the Dreyfus Affair is of enormous importance today. After French President Emmanuel Macron hailed Pétain as a “great soldier” last year while launching police repression of social protests, and as forces in the French Ministry of Culture try to re-publish the works of Maurras, it is clearer than ever that it does not solely belong to the past. Polanski's film on this victory of truth against nationalism and militarism is a significant contribution that deserves a wide audience.



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