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Zola's Brave Pen



DURING November of 1894, Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, an artillery officer assigned to the French general staff under Gen. Auguste Mercier, the minister of war, was tried for treason in betraying military secrets to Germany.

The court-martial — distinguished Col. du Paty de Clam presiding — sentenced Dreyfus to the horror of Devil's Island for life, the maximum punishment permitted.

It was not a deliberate plot to frame an innocent man, as sometimes reported. It was the outcome of a blunder after which the entire hierarchy of France's government fabricated and manipulated its own self-serving defense on a face-saving basis.

THERE WERE 31 newspapers in Paris. High officials are indispensable news sources. Patronizing them can pay off. Angering them can close the door to "inside" information, as true in Washington today as in Paris then.

Many Frenchmen somehow felt uneasy about the trial. The government insiders met this nervousness with what the French call "suffiance," an unshakable, self-satisfied mien. But they also blunted the free press by holding what are now known in Washington as "back-grounders" — private meetings with selected newsmen to reveal unattributable background factors, a doubtful device at best.

Silence was "patriotism," silence was "in the national interest," silence was "the duty of a responsible press" — as so often rationalized by embarrassed officials the world over.

Then on Jan. 13, 1898 came Emile Zola

in the newspaper L'Aurore with his famous "J'Accuse!"

Balzac once said, "Great writing lives on the passions it contains," and, with these, Zola achieved newspaper immortality, in an open letter to the President of France.

In separate paragraphs, each beginning "I accuse," he specifically named two ministers of war, Gens. Mercier and Billot, as accomplices in Dreyfus's conviction, accused the chiefs of the general staff, Boisdeffre and Gonse, of conspiring in the same crime, and Col. du Paty de Clam of being their vehicle. He tore into the "back-grounders" of his day and accused the War Ministry of manipulating the news to mislead the people, "an abominable campaign performed on order."

The public was aghast. So were the chancelleries of all Europe. But nothing proved truer than Zola's classic ending to his assertions: "Truth is on the march and nothing will stop it."

The internationally dangerous case, which Zola had caused to symbolize invisible government gone bad, including its overtones of anti-semitism, press softening and self-justification, was reopened. The expanded official cover-ups collapsed with the fall of the government itself.

ON JULY 13, 1906, almost 12 years after Dreyfus's arrest, a bill to restore him to the army carried in the French Chamber by 442-32.

Zola had died four years earlier. At his funeral Anatole France spoke the just and noble epitaph of the man who "for a moment . . . was the conscience of mankind."