

“I ACCUSE...!”

Open Letter to the President of the French Republic
By Émile Zola

Letter to Félix Faure

Mr President,

Would you allow me, grateful as I am for the kind reception you once extended to me, to show my concern about maintaining your well-deserved prestige and to point out that your star which, until now, has shone so brightly, risks being dimmed by the most shameful and indelible of stains.

Unscathed by the vilest slander, you have won over the hearts of all. You are radiant in the patriotic glory of our country's alliance with Russia, you are about to preside over the solemn triumph of our World Fair, the jewel that crowns this great century of Labour, Truth, and Liberty. But what filth this wretched Dreyfus affair¹ has cast on your name, or, might I say, your reign. A court martial, under orders, has just dared to acquit that character, Esterhazy, the supreme insult to all truth and all justice. And now the image of France is sullied by this filth, and History shall record that it was under your presidency that this crime against society was committed.

As they have dared, so shall I dare. Dare to tell the truth, as I have pledged to tell it, in full, since the normal channels of justice have failed to do so. My duty is to speak out, not to become an accomplice in this travesty. My nights would otherwise be haunted by the spectre of an innocent man, far away, suffering the most horrible of tortures for a crime he did not commit.

And it is to you, Mr President, that I shall proclaim this truth, with all the revulsion that an honest man can summon. Knowing your integrity, I am convinced that you do not know the truth. But to whom if not to you, the first magistrate of the country, shall I reveal the vile baseness of those who truly are guilty?

The truth, first of all, about the trial and conviction of Dreyfus.

At the root of it all is one evil man, Lt. Colonel du Paty de Clam, who was at the time a mere Major. He is the entire Dreyfus case, and it can only be understood through an honest and thorough examination that reveals his actions and responsibilities. He appears to be the shadiest and most complex of creatures, spinning outlandish intrigues, stooping to the deceits of dime novels, complete with stolen documents, anonymous letters, meetings in deserted spots, mysterious women scurrying around at night, peddling damning evidence. He was the one who came up with the scheme of dictating the text of the *bordereau* to Dreyfus; he was the one who had the idea of observing him in a mirror-lined room. And he was the one that Major Forzinetti caught carrying a shuttered lantern that he planned to throw open on the accused man while he slept, hoping that, jolted awake by the sudden flash of light, Dreyfus would blurt out his guilt.

I need say no more: let us seek and we shall find. I am stating simply that Major du Paty de Clam, as the officer of justice charged with the preliminary investigation of the Dreyfus case, is the first and the most grievous offender in the ghastly miscarriage of justice that has been committed.

The *bordereau* had already been for some time in the hands of Colonel Sandherr, Head of the Intelligence Office, who has since died of a paralytic stroke. Information was “leaked”, papers were disappearing, then as they continue to do to this day; and, as the search for the author of the *bordereau* progressed, little by little, an *a priori* assumption developed that it could only have come from an officer of the General Staff, and furthermore, an artillery officer. This interpretation, wrong on both counts, shows how superficially the *bordereau* was analyzed, for a logical examination shows that it could only have come from an infantry officer.

So an internal search was conducted. Handwriting samples were compared, as if this were some family affair, a traitor to be sniffed out and expelled from within the War Office. And, although I have no desire to dwell on a story that is only partly known, Major du Paty de Clam entered on the scene at the first whiff of suspicion of Dreyfus. From that moment on, he was the one who “invented” Dreyfus the traitor, the one who orchestrated the whole affair and made it his own. He boasted that he would confound him and make him confess all. Oh, yes, there was of course the Minister of War, General Mercier, a man of apparently mediocre intellect; and there were also the Chief of Staff, General de Boisdeffre, who appears to have yielded to his own religious bigotry, and the Deputy Chief of Staff, General Gonse, whose conscience allowed for many accommodations. But, at bottom, it all started with Major du Paty de Clam, who led them on, hypnotized them, for, as an adept of spiritualism and the occult, he could converse with spirits. No one would ever believe the experiments to which he subjected the unfortunate Dreyfus, the traps he set for him, the wild investigations, the monstrous fantasies, the whole demented torture.

Ah, that first trial! What a nightmare it is for all who know it in its true details. Major du Paty de Clam had Dreyfus arrested and placed in solitary confinement. He ran to Mme Dreyfus, terrorized her, telling her that if she talked her husband would be ruined. Meanwhile, the unfortunate Dreyfus was tearing at his flesh and proclaiming his innocence. And this is how the case proceeded, like some fifteenth-century chronicle, shrouded in mystery, swamped in all manner of nasty twists and turns, all stemming from one trumped-up charge, that idiot *bordereau*. This was not only a bit of cheap trickery but also the most outrageous fraud imaginable, for almost all of these notorious secrets turned out in fact to be worthless. I dwell on this, because this is the germ of it all, whence the true crime would emerge, that horrifying miscarriage of justice that has blighted France. I would like to point out how this travesty was made possible, how it sprang out of the machinations of Major du Paty de Clam, how Generals Mercier, de Boisdeffre and Gonse became so ensnared in this falsehood that they would later feel compelled to impose it as holy and indisputable truth. Having set it all in motion merely by carelessness and lack of intelligence, they seem at worst to have given in to the religious bias of their milieu and the prejudices of their class. In the end, they allowed stupidity to prevail.

But now we see Dreyfus appearing before the court martial. Behind the closed doors, the utmost secrecy is demanded. Had a traitor opened the border to the enemy and driven the German Emperor straight to Notre-Dame the measures of secrecy and silence could not have been more stringent. The public was astounded; rumours flew of the most horrible acts, the most monstrous deceptions, lies that were an affront to our history. The public, naturally, was taken in. No punishment could be too harsh. The people clamoured for the traitor to be publicly stripped of his rank and demanded to see him writhing with remorse on his rock of infamy. Could these things be true, these unspeakable acts, these deeds so dangerous that they must be carefully hidden behind closed doors to keep Europe from going up in flames? No! They were nothing but the demented fabrications of Major du Paty de Clam, a cover-up of the most preposterous fantasies imaginable. To be convinced of this one need only read carefully the accusation as it was presented before the court martial.

How flimsy it is! The fact that someone could have been convicted on this charge is the ultimate iniquity. I defy decent men to read it without a stir of indignation in their hearts and a cry of revulsion, at the thought of the undeserved punishment being meted out there on Devil's Island. He knew several languages. A crime! He carried no compromising papers. A crime! He would occasionally visit his birthplace. A crime! He was hard-working, and strove to be well informed. A crime! He did not become confused. A crime! He became confused. A crime! And how childish the language is, how groundless the accusation! We also heard talk of fourteen charges but we found only one, the one about the *bordereau*, and we learn that even there the handwriting experts could not agree. One of them, Mr Gobert, faced military pressure when he dared to come to a conclusion other than the desired one. We were told also that twenty-three officers had testified against Dreyfus. We still do not know what questions they were asked, but it is certain that not all of them implicated him. It should be noted, furthermore, that all of them came from the War Office. The whole case had been handled as an internal affair, among insiders. And we must not forget this: members of the General Staff had sought this trial to begin with and had passed judgment. And now they were passing judgment once again.

So all that remained of the case was the *bordereau*, on which the experts had not been able to agree. It is said that within the council chamber the judges were naturally leaning toward acquittal. It becomes clear why, at that point, as justification for the verdict, it became vitally important to turn up some damning evidence, a secret document that, like God, could not be shown, but which explained everything, and was invisible, unknowable, and incontrovertible. I deny the existence of that document. With all my strength, I deny it! Some trivial note, maybe, about some easy women, wherein a certain D... was becoming too insistent, no doubt some demanding husband who felt he wasn't getting a good enough price for the use of his wife. But a document concerning national defence that could not be produced without sparking an immediate declaration of war tomorrow? No! No! It is a lie, all the more odious and cynical in that its perpetrators are getting off free without even admitting it. They stirred up all of France, they hid behind the understandable commotion they had set off, they sealed their lips while troubling our hearts and perverting our spirit. I know of no greater crime against the state.

These, Mr President, are the facts that explain how this miscarriage of justice came about; The evidence of Dreyfus's character, his affluence, the lack of motive and his continued affirmation of innocence combine to show that he is the victim of the lurid imagination of Major du Paty de Clam, the religious circles surrounding him, and the "dirty Jew" obsession that is the scourge of our time.

And now we come to the Esterhazy case. Three years have passed, many consciences remain profoundly troubled, become anxious, investigate, and wind up convinced that Dreyfus is innocent.

I shall not chronicle these doubts and the subsequent conclusion reached by Mr Scheurer-Kestner. But, while he was conducting his own investigation, major events were occurring at headquarters. Colonel Sandherr had died and Lt. Colonel Picquart had succeeded him as Head of the Intelligence Office. It was in this capacity, in the exercise of his office, that Lt. Colonel Picquart came into possession of a telegram addressed to Major Esterhazy by an agent of a foreign power. His express duty was to open an inquiry. What is certain is that he never once acted against the will of his superiors. He thus submitted his suspicions to his hierarchical senior officers, first General Gonse, then General de Boisdeffre, and finally General Billot, who had succeeded General Mercier as Minister of War. That famous much-discussed Picquart file was none other than the Billot file, by which I mean the file created by a subordinate for his minister, which can still probably be found at the War Office. The investigation lasted from May to September 1896, and what must be said loud and clear is that General Gonse was at that time convinced that Esterhazy was guilty and that

Generals de Boisdeffre and Billot had no doubt that the handwriting on the famous *bordereau* was Esterhazy's. This was the definitive conclusion of Lt. Colonel Picquart's investigation. But feelings were running high, for the conviction of Esterhazy would inevitably lead to a retrial of Dreyfus, an eventuality that the General Staff wanted at all costs to avoid.

This must have led to a brief moment of psychological anguish. Note that, so far, General Billot was in no way compromised. Newly appointed to his position, he had the authority to bring out the truth. He did not dare, no doubt in terror of public opinion, certainly for fear of implicating the whole General Staff, General de Boisdeffre, and General Gonse, not to mention the subordinates. So he hesitated for a brief moment of struggle between his conscience and what he believed to be the interest of the military. Once that moment passed, it was already too late. He had committed himself and he was compromised. From that point on, his responsibility only grew, he took on the crimes of others, he became as guilty as they, if not more so, for he was in a position to bring about justice and did nothing. Can you understand this: for the last year General Billot, Generals Gonse and de Boisdeffre have known that Dreyfus is innocent, and they have kept this terrible knowledge to themselves? And these people sleep at night, and have wives and children they love!

Lt. Colonel Picquart had carried out his duty as an honest man. He kept insisting to his superiors in the name of justice. He even begged them, telling them how impolitic it was to temporise in the face of the terrible storm that was brewing and that would break when the truth became known. This was the language that Mr. Scheurer-Kestner later used with General Billot as well, appealing to his patriotism to take charge of the case so that it would not degenerate into a public disaster. But no! The crime had been committed and the General Staff could no longer admit to it. And so Lt. Colonel Picquart was sent away on official duty. He got sent further and further away until he landed in Tunisia, where they tried eventually to reward his courage with an assignment that would certainly have gotten him massacred, in the very same area where the Marquis de Morès had been killed. He was not in disgrace, indeed: General Gonse even maintained a friendly correspondence with him. It is just that there are certain secrets that are better left alone.

Meanwhile, in Paris, truth was marching on, inevitably, and we know how the long-awaited storm broke. Mr Mathieu Dreyfus denounced Major Esterhazy as the real author of the *bordereau* just as Mr Scheurer-Kestner was handing over to the Minister of Justice a request for the revision of the trial. This is where Major Esterhazy comes in. Witnesses say that he was at first in a panic, on the verge of suicide or running away. Then all of a sudden, emboldened, he amazed Paris by the violence of his attitude. Rescue had come, in the form of an anonymous letter warning of enemy actions, and a mysterious woman had even gone to the trouble one night of slipping him a paper, stolen from headquarters, that would save him. Here I cannot help seeing the handiwork of Lt. Colonel du Paty de Clam, with the trademark fruits of his fertile imagination. His achievement, Dreyfus's conviction, was in danger, and he surely was determined to protect it. A retrial would mean that this whole extraordinary saga, so extravagant, so tragic, with its denouement on Devil's Island, would fall apart! This he could not allow to happen. From then on, it became a duel between Lt. Colonel Picquart and Lt. Colonel du Paty de Clam, one with his face visible, the other masked. The next step would take them both to civil court. It came down, once again, to the General Staff protecting itself, not wanting to admit its crime, an abomination that has been growing by the minute.

In disbelief, people wondered who Commander Esterhazy's protectors were. First of all, behind the scenes, Lt. Colonel du Paty de Clam was the one who had concocted the whole story, who kept it going, tipping his hand with his outrageous methods. Next General de Boisdeffre, then General Gonse, and finally, General Billot himself were all pulled into the effort to get the Major

acquitted, for acknowledging Dreyfus's innocence would make the War Office collapse under the weight of public contempt. And the astounding outcome of this appalling situation was that the one decent man involved, Lt. Colonel Picquart who, alone, had done his duty, was to become the victim, the one who got ridiculed and punished. O justice, what horrible despair grips our hearts? It was even claimed that he himself was the forger, that he had fabricated the letter-telegram in order to destroy Esterhazy. But, good God, why? To what end? Find me a motive. Was he, too, being paid off by the Jews? The best part of it is that Picquart was himself an anti-Semite. Yes! We have before us the ignoble spectacle of men who are sunken in debts and crimes being hailed as innocent, whereas the honor of a man whose life is spotless is being vilely attacked: A society that sinks to that level has fallen into decay.

The Esterhazy affair, thus, Mr President, comes down to this: a guilty man is being passed off as innocent. For almost two months we have been following this nasty business hour by hour. I am being brief, for this is but the abridged version of a story whose sordid pages will some day be written out in full. And so we have seen General de Pellieux, and then Major Ravary conduct an outrageous inquiry from which criminals emerge glorified and honest people sullied. And then a court martial was convened.

How could anyone expect a court martial to undo what another court martial had done?

I am not even talking about the way the judges were hand-picked. Doesn't the overriding idea of discipline, which is the lifeblood of these soldiers, itself undercut their capacity for fairness? Discipline means obedience. When the Minister of War, the commander in chief, proclaims, in public and to the acclamation of the nation's representatives, the absolute authority of a previous verdict, how can you expect a court martial to rule against him? It is a hierarchical impossibility. General Billot directed the judges in his preliminary remarks, and they proceeded to judgement as they would to battle, unquestioningly. The preconceived opinion they brought to the bench was obviously the following: "Dreyfus was found guilty for the crime of treason by a court martial; he therefore is guilty and we, a court martial, cannot declare him innocent. On the other hand, we know that acknowledging Esterhazy's guilt would be tantamount to proclaiming Dreyfus innocent." There was no way for them to escape this rationale.

So they rendered an iniquitous verdict that will forever weigh upon our courts martial and will henceforth cast a shadow of suspicion on all their decrees. The first court martial was perhaps unintelligent; the second one is inescapably criminal. Their excuse, I repeat, is that the supreme chief had spoken, declaring the previous judgment incontrovertible, holy and above mere mortals. How, then, could subordinates contradict it? We are told of the honour of the army; we are supposed to love and respect it. Ah, yes, of course, an army that would rise to the first threat, that would defend French soil, that army is the nation itself, and for that army we have nothing but devotion and respect. But this is not about that army, whose dignity we are seeking, in our cry for justice. What is at stake is the sword, the master that will one day, perhaps, be forced upon us. Bow and scrape before that sword, that god? No!

As I have shown, the Dreyfus case was a matter internal to the War Office: an officer of the General Staff, denounced by his co-officers of the General Staff, sentenced under pressure by the Chiefs of Staff. Once again, he could not be found innocent without the entire General Staff being guilty. And so, by all means imaginable, by press campaigns, by official communications, by influence, the War Office covered up for Esterhazy only to condemn Dreyfus once again. Ah, what a good sweeping out the government of this Republic should give to that Jesuit-lair, as General Billot himself calls it. Where is that truly strong, judiciously patriotic administration that will dare to clean house and start afresh? How many people I know who, faced with the possibility of

war, tremble in anguish knowing to what hands we are entrusting our nation's defence! And what a nest of vile intrigues, gossip, and destruction that sacred sanctuary that decides the nation's fate has become! We are horrified by the terrible light the Dreyfus affair has cast upon it all, this human sacrifice of an unfortunate man, a "dirty Jew." Ah, what a cesspool of folly and foolishness, what preposterous fantasies, what corrupt police tactics, what inquisitorial, tyrannical practices! What petty whims of a few higher-ups trampling the nation under their boots, ramming back down their throats the people's cries for truth and justice, with the travesty of state security as a pretext.

Indeed, it is a crime to have relied on the most squalid elements of the press, and to have entrusted Esterhazy's defense to the vermin of Paris, who are now gloating over the defeat of justice and plain truth. It is a crime that those people who wish to see a generous France take her place as leader of all the free and just nations are being accused of fomenting turmoil in the country, denounced by the very plotters who are conniving so shamelessly to foist this miscarriage of justice on the entire world. It is a crime to lie to the public, to twist public opinion to insane lengths in the service of the vilest death-dealing machinations. It is a crime to poison the minds of the meek and the humble, to stoke the passions of reactionism and intolerance, by appealing to that odious anti-Semitism that, unchecked, will destroy the freedom-loving France of the Rights of Man. It is a crime to exploit patriotism in the service of hatred, and it is, finally, a crime to ensconce the sword as the modern god, whereas all science is toiling to achieve the coming era of truth and justice.

Truth and justice, so ardently longed for! How terrible it is to see them trampled, unrecognised and ignored! I can feel Mr Scheurer-Kestner's soul withering and I believe that one day he will even feel sorry for having failed, when questioned by the Senate, to spill all and lay out the whole mess. A man of honour, as he had been all his life, he believed that the truth would speak for itself, especially since it appeared to him plain as day. Why stir up trouble, especially since the sun would soon shine? It is for this serene trust that he is now being so cruelly punished. The same goes for Lt. Colonel Picquart, who, guided by the highest sentiment of dignity, did not wish to publish General Gonse's correspondence. These scruples are all the more honourable since he remained mindful of discipline, while his superiors were dragging his name through the mud and casting suspicion on him, in the most astounding and outrageous ways. There are two victims, two decent men, two simple hearts, who left their fates to God, while the devil was taking charge. Regarding Lt. Col. Picquart, even this despicable deed was perpetrated: a French tribunal allowed the statement of the case to become a public indictment of one of the witnesses [Picquart], accusing him of all sorts of wrongdoing. It then chose to prosecute the case behind closed doors as soon as that witness was brought in to defend himself. I say this is yet another crime, and this crime will stir consciences everywhere. These military tribunals have, decidedly, a most singular idea of justice.

This is the plain truth, Mr President, and it is terrifying. It will leave an indelible stain on your presidency. I realise that you have no power over this case, that you are limited by the Constitution and your entourage. You have, nonetheless, your duty as a man, which you will recognise and fulfill. As for myself, I have not despaired in the least, of the triumph of right. I repeat with the most vehement conviction: truth is on the march, and nothing will stop it. Today is only the beginning, for it is only today that the positions have become clear: on one side, those who are guilty, who do not want the light to shine forth, on the other, those who seek justice and who will give their lives to attain it. I said it before and I repeat it now: when truth is buried underground, it grows and it builds up so much force that the day it explodes it blasts everything with it. We shall see whether we have been setting ourselves up for the most resounding of disasters, yet to come.

But this letter is long, Mr President, and it is time for me to conclude it.

I accuse Lt. Col. du Paty de Clam of being the diabolical creator of this miscarriage of justice - unknowingly, I am willing to believe - and of defending this sorry deed, over the last three years, by all manner of bizarre and evil machinations.

I accuse General Mercier of complicity, at least by mental weakness, in one of the greatest inequities of the century.

I accuse General Billot of having held in his hands absolute proof of Dreyfus's innocence and concealing it, thereby making himself guilty of crimes against mankind and justice, as a political expedient and a way for the compromised General Staff to save face.

I accuse General de Boisdeffre and General Gonse of complicity in the same crime, the former, no doubt, out of religious prejudice, the latter perhaps out of that esprit de corps that has transformed the War Office into an unassailable holy ark.

I accuse General de Pellieux and Major Ravary of conducting a fraudulent inquiry, by which I mean a monstrously biased one, as attested by the latter in a report that is an imperishable monument to naïve insolence.

I accuse the three handwriting experts, Messrs. Belhomme, Varinard and Couard, of having submitted reports that were deceitful and fraudulent, unless a medical examination finds them to be suffering from a disease that impairs their eyesight and judgment.

I accuse the offices of the War Office of having used the press, particularly *L'Eclair* and *L'Echo de Paris*, to conduct an abominable campaign to mislead public opinion and cover up their own wrongdoing.

Finally, I accuse the first court martial of violating the law by convicting the accused on the basis of evidence that was kept secret, and I accuse the second court martial of covering up this illegality, on orders, by committing the judicial crime of acquitting a guilty man with full knowledge of his guilt.

In making these accusations I am aware that I am making myself liable to articles 30 and 31 of the July 29 1881 law on the press making libel a punishable offense. I expose myself to that risk voluntarily.

As for the people I am accusing, I do not know them, I have never seen them, and I bear them neither ill will nor hatred. To me they are mere entities, agents of harm to society. The action I am taking is no more than a radical measure to hasten the explosion of truth and justice.

I have but one passion, the search for light, in the name of humanity which has suffered so much and is entitled to happiness. My fiery protest is simply the cry of my very soul.

Let them dare, then, to bring me before a court of law and investigate in the full light of day!

I am waiting.

With my deepest respect, Mr President.

Émile Zola