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Elizabeth Everton received the CSW Mary Wollstonecraft Award in June of 2012 for her dissertation, titled "Sisters and Soldiers: The Representation and Participation of Women in the Antidreyfusard Movement." It explores gender relations in the early French extreme Right through a study of gendered images, narratives, and roles in nationalist and antisemitic milieux during the Dreyfus Affair.

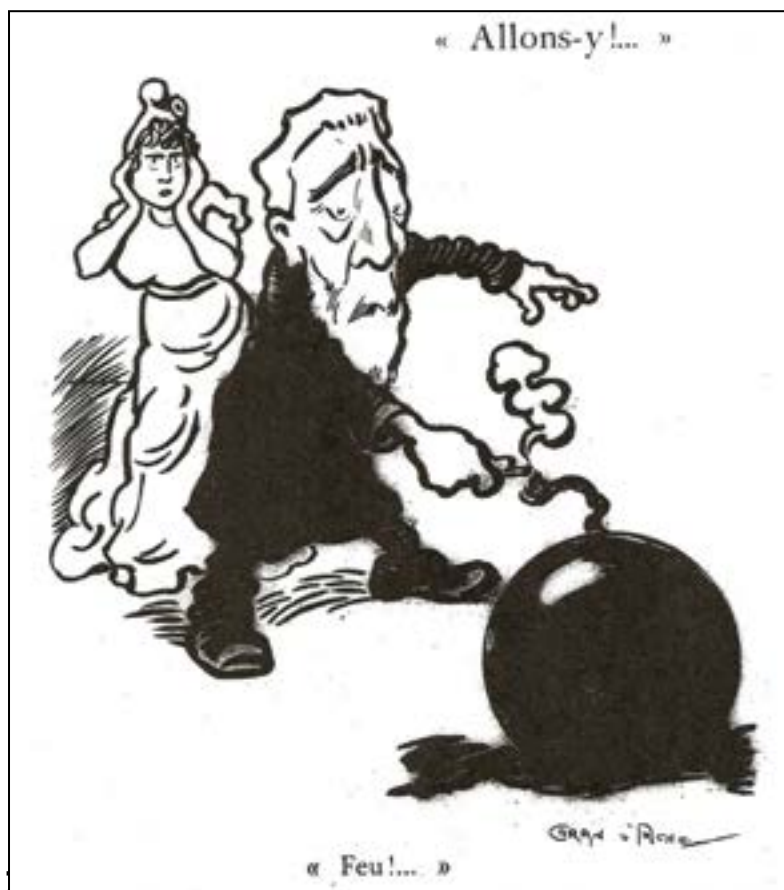


# SISTERS AND SOLDIERS

## The Representation and Participation of Women in the Antidreyfusard Movement

by Elizabeth Everton

IN SEPTEMBER 1894, an agent of the French Intelligence Bureau discovered a list of French military secrets in a wastebasket at the German Embassy in Paris. This document was quickly misattributed to a Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, who was convicted in a hasty court martial and sentenced to deportation in perpetuity. Over the next four years, his sentence was challenged by allies, called "dreyfusards," who found in the effort to reopen the case a quasi-mystical quest in defense of truth, justice, and liberal republican ideals. They were countered by others, the "antidreyfusards," who saw truth as less important than the well-being of the nation or who believed that, being Jewish, Dreyfus was necessarily a traitor. In French history, memory, and culture, the Dreyfus Affair is a red-letter event – the cradle of the contemporary Left and Right and the birthplace of the public intellectual. It is a daunting subject for a researcher, not only because of the enormous body of literature around it but because its very significance has given it a degree of impenetrability. There is a certain difficulty in breaking through to the event itself, in asking different questions when faced with such familiar faces and texts.



When I entered the Department of History at UCLA, I had no thought of tackling this particular challenge. It was not until my third year of graduate school, spent at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris, that I started to consider it as a project after enrolling in a year-long seminar on intellectuals' involvement in the Dreyfus Affair. By the end of the year, I had become fascinated by the Affair: by its realignment of French politics, society, and culture; by the passions it roused in so many individuals and groups; and by the opportunity it offered those excluded from power, such as women, to claim political voices. It was this last element that particularly piqued my interest. French women in the 1890s were legally subordinated to men and systematically denied political and civil rights. The womanly ideal was domestic and maternal; most people felt that women's place was in the home, not at the political rally. Looking closely at the dreyfusard and antidreyfusard movements, however, I found numerous women engaging in political activity through informal channels—by attending meetings and rallies, joining political organizations, fundraising and donating, and signing petitions. Liberal and socialist dreyfusards and conservative and reactionary antidreyfusards alike depended on their female adherents and made celebrities out of the women involved in the Affair.

The disjunction between discourses of domesticity and day to day political practice was especially marked among the nationalist,

antisemitic, conservative, and religious antidreyfusards. Here were individuals and organizations driven by a sort of hyper-masculinity couched in militaristic terms and enacted through brutal street violence; here were social reactionaries who shouted louder than anyone about the supposed withering away of traditional mores. And yet antidreyfusard writing was rife with stories about women who left their homes to assume male roles, abilities, and even identities, while antidreyfusard organizations sought out female members even as they espoused traditional gender norms and identified themselves as the last bastion of masculinity. This is not to say that the presence of women within antidreyfusism was unproblematic. The value placed upon female action depended on its immediate circumstances; it was expected to be reactive, contingent, temporary, and distinct from and complementary to that of men. Only with these safeguards in place could antidreyfusards situate women within their effort to reclaim the nation without endangering what they saw as its essential values.

The paragon of this form of antidreyfusard womanhood was Berthe Henry, whose husband, an officer in the Intelligence Bureau, had forged documents to shore up the army's case against Dreyfus. Thrust into the public eye following the discovery of these forgeries, "the widow Henry" quickly became an antidreyfusard heroine, at once the quintessential victim of an imagined Jewish-liberal cabal and her own avenger. In the former capacity, her

"feminine" suffering was presented as emblematic of the suffering of the nation; in the latter, she assumed elements of her husband's masculine identity not only as head of the household but as an officer in the French army and an important witness against Dreyfus. Encouraged by the antidreyfusard press, Henry claimed the prerogative of defending her family's honor, a duty that, in the Third Republic, was both exclusively masculine and in itself constitutive of manhood; she threatened physical violence to those dreyfusards she considered adversaries; and she took the stand at Dreyfus's 1899 retrial to testify not only in lieu of but *as* her husband.

Taking Berthe Henry as a starting point, I embarked on an odyssey across antidreyfusard mentalities. Her actions at Dreyfus's retrial—particularly a staged confrontation with a dreyfusard witness—provided a key to a recurring theme in antidreyfusard writing and imagery: stylized and dramatized interactions between antidreyfusard women and dreyfusard men. Through these, I uncovered a fundamental epistemological difference between dreyfusards and antidreyfusards concerning the criteria of truth. Whereas dreyfusards believed in an objective, pre-existing truth, antidreyfusards identified truth with the credibility of the truth-teller, as defined by his or her interactions with others. Antidreyfusard writers and artists represented this subjective and immediate truth in scenes of women—perceived, in the nineteenth century, as fundamentally untrustworthy—demonstrating their

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credibility by confronting and exposing deceitful dreyfusard men. This theme is particularly prevalent in the work of caricaturist Caran d’Ache, who plumbed the ambiguities inherent in this understanding of truth in images featuring sexually or physically aggressive women identifying and rejecting dreyfusard men.

Antidreyfusard writers saw in Henry’s broken family a symptom of and metaphor for a nation in crisis. As a palliative, they offered a different form of family in the shape of the league—the primary site of antidreyfusard political association—conceptualized as a family of brothers and sisters, in which each member, male or female, had a role to play. The roles offered to female league members tended to be subordinate to those of men, but women’s responsibilities were nonetheless considered to be valuable duties to be carried out on behalf of France. One of the most significant of these was consumer action, a specifically female form of political participation. Buying from approved merchants and boycotting Jewish businesses offered female league members a public presence different from that of men and fostered the development of a collective identity.

As a touchstone for the modern French Left and Right alike, the Dreyfus Affair and its presentation in the press and other media shaped the conceptualization of political and cultural phenomena long after its close. Representations of women, weighted with the baggage of a society that placed a premium upon a clear delineation of gender roles and for which the blurring

of these lines was troubling and powerful, were developed and deployed in order to smooth over the complexities and permit navigation of a traumatic event. Women’s participation in the antidreyfusard movement allowed it to claim universality and relevance beyond the Affair. Indeed, the heirs of the antidreyfusard movement—conservative and extreme right-wing groups in twentieth-century France—drew upon the models of political engagement and rhetoric of gender forged in the Affair. This lineage is seen even today – Marine Le Pen, who recently succeeded her father as leader of the extremist National Front, in many ways recalls her antidreyfusard foremothers.

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*Illustration credit:* Caran d’Ache, “Allons-y!...,”  
*Psst...!*, 10 September 1898.