

A STUDENT ESSAY

Throughout history, institutions of authority have made policies later judged to have been mistakes. From Galileo's imprisonment half a millennium ago, to the Japanese internment camps of this past century, wrongs committed by those in power are rarely, if ever, redressed. The nature of certain historical misdeeds is such that no formal apology, admission of error, or financial compensation could ever erase the damage. The six million Jews lost in the Holocaust can never be brought back to life; the careers ruined by the fervor of McCarthyism can never be restored. Clearly, as exemplified by the Dreyfus affair, even the passage of time cannot amend the greatest historical wrongdoings. The consequences of this scandal prove too immense and the attempts at restitution too weak to make right the French government's wrong.

In the case of Captain Dreyfus himself, the suffering he endured robbed him of twelve years of his life after his sentence of "life imprisonment on infamous Devil's Island." Even though he eventually returned to the army to great success, the injustice done to him could not be undone. As for Emile Zola, a famous writer and supporter of Dreyfus, his piece "J'Accuse," an open condemnation of the government's despicable conduct—led to a libel conviction. That forced Zola "to flee to England [where] he lost most of his fame and fortune." This career-ending blow as a result of defending Dreyfus can hardly be reversed. History will never know what the brilliant Zola could have accomplished had the government not persecuted him. On a more global scale, the implications of the Dreyfus affair reached far beyond those immediately involved. As depicted in the cartoon "A Family Dinner," the tension between Dreyfusards and traditionalists tore families apart, creating rifts impossible to repair. The extent of the damage caused by France's mishandling of the Dreyfus affair makes it all the more unsurprising that feeble attempts at making amends have been entirely inadequate.

Firstly, the French government did not acknowledge its wrongs until it was far too late to help anyone who actually suffered as a result of their error. The military offered a statement that "did not really constitute an apology" "more than a century" after the incident, lending credence to the adage "too little, too late." Similarly, Emile Zola's letter to the French president only received a response a century later, and even then, the president's reply centered far more on glorifying the French state than rectifying the heartache the French government caused. Finally, the Dreyfus affair was unable to inspire the change in attitudes that could be considered a justification for the suffering it brought about. Anti-Semitism is still a rampant problem in France, where it has been "left under the rug to grow like a mold ready to lash out when the moment is right." Evidently, no efforts at erasing past wrongdoings can truly nullify the suffering caused by the mistakes made by authority. In the words of Milan Kundera, "nothing will be redressed."