Maurice Samuels, *Alfred Dreyfus: The Man at the Center of the Affair* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2024), pp. 209.

by *Simon Levis Sullam*

Alfred Dreyfus (1859-1935) is an icon of modern European Jewish history, and perhaps modern history *tout court*, but did he deserve a new biography, a volume in the "Jewish Lives" series of Yale University Press? What is extraordinary about his life apart from the affair that bears his name (1894-1906)? Did something specific in his life trigger the affair? And does the story of Dreyfus' life shed particular light on the causes, or the developments, of the affair and what it came to represent?

Alfred's life was in fact—apart from his judicial nightmare and the ensuing *cause célèbre*—that of a quite ordinary Jewish Frenchman between the 19th and the 20th centuries, born in a well-to-do family of entrepreneurs from Alsace and later married to a wealthy Jewish Parisian, Lucie Hadamard. He studied at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, entered the army, and reached the level of captain in the General Staff. Well-read, socially established, secularized (according to Samuels, in fact, "a rationalist and a skeptic," p. 29), he well represents the fine equilibrium reached by "Frenchness" and "Jewishness" in the Third Republic: an equilibrium that the eruption of modern antisemitism would break.

This eruption resulted from the action of forces that contrasted secularization, *laicité,* and modernization in France at least since the mid-nineteenth century, if not since 1789, when such forces came to identify the "Jew" as the symbol of the evils of modernity. They were mostly the Catholic Church and the Catholic party, foundational segments of the State (the Army to begin with), and the conservative public opinion. Perhaps these negative premises and context are partly neglected in the picture laid out by Samuel—an authority in the study of French antisemitism—as he sets the background of Dreyfus' story. In his treatment, they seem to almost suddenly arise (or arise *post factum*), as major factors coalescing in the creation of the judicial affair. However, independently from Dreyfus' case, France had become since the mid-1880s the cradle of modern antisemitism, thanks to figures such as Édouard Drumont, Alphonse Toussenel and others (and indeed Samuels claims that around this time antisemitism became for France a "cultural

code," (p. 36): an expression notoriously used by Shulamit Volkov for contemporary German antisemitism). Analyzing the reactions to the affair and its consequences, Samuels does linger upon the aggressive anti-Jewish campaign in the newly established antisemitic press (e.g. *La libre Parole* edited by Drumont) and in the largely spread Catholic periodicals, such as *La Croix* published by the Assumptionist order. Attention is then given to the entrance into the French parliament of 22 antisemitic deputies, to the (unsuccessful) proposal of antisemitic legislation, and to the burst of anti-Jewish attacks in major French cities and of all-out violence in Algiers in 1897-1898.

One of the aspects which develop indeed from Alfred Dreyfus's life story and its vicissitudes during the affair is, in Samuels' analysis, Alfred's "resistance," especially to "state-sanctioned violence against individuals—and particularly against Jewish individuals." This was the kind of violence that later marked the "totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century," the author adds. According to Samuels, "It was only because of Dreyfus's stubborn determination to survive this torture that the political struggle to free him could take place." Thanks to the resistance of "this particular man," "truth and justice emerged victorious" and the "forces of reaction" did not "triumph," avoiding "devastating consequences for twentieth-century French politics" (pp. 67-68). Together with the sweeping argument bringing together French politics from last century and the violence of totalitarian regimes (evoked by Samuels), the insistence on Dreyfus' role—a conscious, deliberate role—in resisting in favor of France, "and by extension for the world" (p. 68), is probably exaggerated. Although we do see Alfred reacting to and, with admirable physical and spiritual strengths, coping with the appalling conditions of his imprisonment on Devil's Island, we do not have evidence—also in Dreyfus' *Souvenirs*—of a broader intellectual or political elaboration of this resistance by the French officer, going beyond his personal case. Certainly, Dreyfus' survival made possible the second trial and the mobilization and debates surrounding it. But were it not for the intervention of outstanding figures such as the writer Emile Zola, or the activist and historian Bernard Lazare (among many others), and more generally without the mobilization of the newly self-defined "intellectuals" in the name of liberty and justice—founding values of French democracy—, there would certainly not have been a Dreyfus affair.

Speaking of reactions to the trials and the affair, Samuels is especially careful to contrast the view that Jews remained silent in front of the events and of the rising tide of antisemitism. This view was later expressed by outstanding Jewish figures such as the French prime minister Léon Blum in his *Souvenirs sur l'Affaire* (1935), and by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). But Samuels shows how the major Jewish press of the time intervened in favor of Dreyfus, and the chief rabbi of France Zadoc Kahn assembled at the time a Committee of Defense against Antisemitism, which included Edmond de Rothschild and the president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle.

Apart from such contemporary, specific reactions, Samuels insists on how through the affair for the well-integrated French Jewish community, and for most Jews throughout Europe, a modern Jewish identity emerged. This came to be mostly kept together and was founded, in a new secularized context, by "the memory of—and ongoing fear of—antisemitic persecution" (p. 156). Elegantly written and based on a solid historiography, Samuel's biography of Dreyfus shows us how, not thanks to or because of, but *through* the life of an ordinary Frenchman - who became a scapegoat of bigotry and racism - we can witness, as in a prism of contemporary events and context, the birth of modern Jewish and (perhaps) modern European identity.

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