In 1898, the Dreyfus Affair plunged French society into a yearlong frenzy. In small villages and big cities, angry crowds paraded through the streets, attacking Jews and destroying Jewish-owned businesses. Anger about the imagined power of Jewish capital, as well as fears of treason and racial degeneration, made anti-Semitism a convenient banner behind which many social and political factions could fall in line. The anti-Semitic feelings that had been simmering in France for decades came boiling to the surface.

Until now, the details of this pogrom have slumbered in local archives, but here Pierre Birnbaum, the first to study the full range of events set in motion during the Dreyfus crisis, guides the reader on a tour of France during a tumultuous year. His innovative study makes it clear why, though prolonged violence threatened to topple the government, the institution of the state did not give way. Birnbaum shows not only that many Jews defended themselves but also that police officers made mass arrests and protected Jewish lives and property. His analysis of how and why public order was maintained offers surprising new insights.

Introduction

In January 1898 Emile Zola published "J'accuse," a denunciation of the civil and military authorities who had convicted a captain in the French Army, Alfred Dreyfus, of treason. What followed was the "anti-Semitic moment," a pogrom without fatalities that nevertheless threatened to topple France. It was a return to a time of imprecations and violence. A country on the threshold of modernity experienced the unexpected shock of a new religious war reminiscent of the Crusades. This time it was waged in the name of extreme nationalism, a convenient banner behind which Catholics, Boulangists,* reactionaries, and even republicans fell in line. The defenders of Dreyfus and the Jews were quite alone. For once the "war of the two Frances," which has regularly punctuated the history of that nation, magically evaporated. Cries of "France for the French!" "Down with Zola!" and "Death to the Jews!" rose from one camp, and "The Republic for the republicans!" "Long live the army!" and "Down with the Jews!" from the other. For

*Boulangists: followers of Georges Boulanger, a French general and politician who, in January 1889, nearly brought about a coup d'etat.—trans.
In the Anti-Semitic Moment

a time the Enlightenment almost disappeared from the French hexagon.

It looked as if the anti-Semitic moment would sweep everything away, break down barriers, unite enemies. Hatred of the Jews drew from every possible source: the traditional anti-Judaism of the Catholic world; the renewed denunciation of usury, now transformed into a rejection of Semitic capitalism; the visceral fear of conspiracy and treason; a reactivated fear of the “Prussians”; and fantasies of racial degeneration. France was well placed for a game of fabrication and finger-pointing: in the cities and in sleepy towns, an anti-Semitic revolt erupted. Though fed by ancient undercurrents, it was resolutely modern in its expression.

This anti-Semitic moment was subsequently erased from historical consciousness, eclipsed by the Dreyfus affair itself or, later, by the Vichy regime; it lay dormant, deep in unmined archives. A great deal is known about the Dreyfus affair: the power of propaganda, the inventiveness of artists and writers, the frenzy of the press, the passion of the politicians, and the extent of the prejudice, which existed even within the institutions of the republican government. But virtually nothing is known about the streets, the demonstrations, the parades, the marches, the racket, or the burned effigies during the affair. Nothing is known about the vociferous and out-of-control mobs, their screams, their slogans, their songs, or about the intermittent attacks on merchants who were Jewish or taken for Jewish, or about the rage to destroy their shops or break down the doors of synagogues.

Just when it looked as if everything were collapsing, when citizens were being cornered and the state and its leaders were doing nothing to help, the state apparatus suddenly mounted a resistance and held fast, and the worst outcome was avoided. The institution of the state did not give way. No one would make fools of the prefectoral corps, the police, and the gendarmerie, who maintained public order and suffered blows to protect the Jews and the civil peace. Even when firearms went off and caused panic, and when blades of all sorts appeared from the rioters’ pockets, police officers and gendarmes tirelessly cleared the streets, made mass arrests, and protected shops, office buildings, and synagogues.

The type of account I am about to give has never before been attempted. It is a new kind of tour of France, a random wandering from one department seat to another. I have put my faith in an unbridled micro-history that departs from conventional methods and leaves room for improvisation. This tour of anti-Semitic France turns its back on meticulous research methods, on the desire to explain, on the goal of providing the carefully selected evidentiary proof, on quantifying and demonstrating how the variables were constructed, and on reaching definitive conclusions. In 1898, just before the dawn of a new century, French society and French mores were in a state of confusion. This alone warrants that we pause, without worrying about the eternal distinction between “limestone” and “granite” evidence, without paying heed to cultural or social divisions, supposedly the only factors to produce meaning, and without lingering over each region’s long traditions to discover a decisive guiding thread. The confusion that has blurred reference points had a source. From the time “J’accuse” was published until Zola’s trials, in February and April 1898, from the legislative elections of May 1898 until the last days of December, and, to varying degrees, up to the trial in Rennes, French society, both openly and covertly, abandoned itself in great measure to a multiform anti-Semitism. Of course, even today people will sometimes proclaim that anti-Semitism was not at the heart of the Dreyfus affair, that it was a secondary factor. As in the case of the Vichy regime, there is a danger of “Judeocentrism,” but there is also a risk of underestimating the anti-Jewish sentiment. I will not settle the matter here through multivariate analyses, carefully compiled statistics, or unassailable geographical charts.

Rather, by randomly exploring the archives, by moving from place to place, drawn to one thing or another, I shall build my account on everything and on nothing. As I plunge into the local and immerse myself in the daily life of the provinces to listen in on the Dreyfus affair, I shall depend a great deal on intuition, on the desire to reimagine one province or another, one city or another, in the grip of the affair. It is up to readers to decide whether this archival fishing expedition is productive.

I hope that readers will at least give me the benefit of the doubt, that they will imagine in turn the apprentice “historian of the local” in his endless travels, his lonely days and nights brightened by the daily harvest...
of departmental archives, at the mercy of everyone’s goodwill. I hope that readers, confronted with so much disorder, so many liberties taken with the rules of research as it should be conducted, will forgive my somewhat vagabond “taste for the local archives.” It will quickly become clear that, in addition to the risks of reaching the saturation point, of being overly repetitive—something that can have no demonstrative value—and of becoming dangerously absorbed in the material itself, I faced another formidable difficulty as I dived headlong into the local, namely, that of resorting too often to quotation. And clearly, “that captivated restitution is insufficient.”

All the same, it was worth the gamble, if only to stake out a territory to better explore later by the rules. It was particularly worthwhile since the only book dealing with the anti-Semitic moment in France, Stephen Wilson’s remarkable but already old study, relies solely on the filtered and slanted archives centralized in Paris. But they are merely the tip of the iceberg and hence wholly inadequate. I took a preliminary look at that material, but my goal was to anchor the anti-Semitic moment in the local, by slowly moving through two geographical circles that I constructed for the occasion. They differ in their circumference, but both revolve around the center of France.

I can hardly express the pleasure I felt in discovering the infinite treasures of the local archives—too rapidly mined, to be sure—from Périgueux to Nancy; from Rouen to Tarbes; from Bourges to Marseilles; from Angers to Dijon to Le Puy-en-Velay; from Toulouse to La Rochelle; from Caen to Guéret, Montpellier, and Lyon; from Orléans to Bordeaux; from Quimper to Clermont-Ferrand and Bar-le-Duc; from Limoges to Rennes; from Rodiez to La Roche-sur-Yon; from Nantes to Pau, Avignon, Tulle, and Nîmes. I barely know how to tell of the joy I experienced in uncovering vast local archives tucked away, forgotten, even in the office of the Paris prefecture; of my amazement when I saw these neat rows of virtually untouched folders. In these local documents daily life can be decoded, a life that presses on and adapts, indifferent to the events.

Do not dwell too much on the weaknesses of this approach compared with the usual methods: it may finally bring to life the protagonists in that forgotten anti-Semitic moment.

On January 14, 1898, an anonymous police informant sent this alarming report to the Paris prefecture:

What is about to happen in Paris is a much more dangerous riot: it will have a definite goal, the looting of Jewish shops. Everyone is sick at what has happened; they are stupefied that no one has managed to shut up the German Jewish hirelings, and a movement is manifestly under way. The students? You know about them. The people in the outlying districts? Perhaps I’ll tell you about them. The people in the outlying districts? Perhaps I’ll tell you about them.

Yesterday I was in Montmartre and Clignancourt, listening to the conversations in cafés, at bar counters, and in the streets: the exasperation is universal. These good people, moved by understandable feelings, will be joined by a mob of vagrants who have nothing to lose, fanatical young people, anarchists, enemies of the Jews. I myself know ten employees of Jewish companies who seek only revenge.

Paris is going to see what Algiers and Oran have seen, and what Vienna, Austria, saw a few months ago. When a street movement