Introduction

I set out to write this book for a number of reasons, but primary among them was the growing fascination and plain excitement I felt as I became familiar with the extraordinary trials of three Jews, Alfred Dreyfus, Mendel Beilis, and Leo Frank. The sensational charges against these three men, the passions of their accusers and defenders, the hundreds of thousands of people swept up in the “affairs” that developed from the trials add up to an irresistible and an instructive story. It is one that far transcends the personal tragedies – however cruel and outrageous – of the three men and their families, and it is one that has never been told in a comparative perspective, as part of a larger whole in the generation before World War I.

There has recently been much discussion, and lamentation, concerning how the writing of history has been, in the words of one historian, “institutionalized.” It is a revival of an older and recurring discussion in the historical profession. Roughly translated, the charge is that the discipline of history has been taken over by overspecialized academic historians and in the process has become fragmented within itself and sadly remote from the concerns and consciousness of society at large, of ordinary educated readers. Critics charge that professional history is too often arcane, pedantic, and, alas, simply unreadable. Against such charges professional historians, when they pay any attention to the complaints, reply that history written by dilettantes suffers, with rare exceptions, from crippling defects: conceptual superficiality, factual unreliability, and an inclination to cheap sensationalism.

There is much more content and complexity to these debates than it is appropriate to explore here, but it has long been my concern and hope, as a professional historian, to break out of the stereotypes they suggest, even while recognizing an element of truth in them. The story of the Three Affairs offers a marvelous opportunity to do so. Many educated readers will have heard something about the Dreyfus Affair (1898–1900);

2For a wide-ranging and provocative discussion of the matter, see Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge, 1988).
few pages of modern history offer as much color and fascination. Revolving
around the story of a Jewish officer in the French Army unjustly accused
of espionage, it has the qualities of a mystery novel, one that Agatha
Christie could not top. Indeed, many of the leading characters of the
Affair are so unbelievable that few novelists would have the audacity to
create them. The dizzying twists and turns of events, the plots and coun-
terplots, the elaborate puzzles stagger the imagination — and, as anyone
who has read an account of the Dreyfus Affair will no doubt add, sorely
tax the memory. Many of the mysteries associated with the Affair remain
unanswered to this day. A recent scholarly study of it remained on the
best-seller list in France for several years.5

The less widely known Beills (1911–13) and Frank (1913–15) affairs offer
even more colorful — and lurid — reading. They involve, respectively,
charges of ritual murder by Jews for Christian blood and charges of murder
as a result of Jewish sexual perversity, the latter culminating in a lynch
mob storming the walls of a state prison to hang the unfortunate Jew
whose throat had already been cut several weeks before by a fellow
prisoner. These affairs, too, riveted the attention of contemporaries and
commanded front-page attention both inside and outside the countries
involved. The Beills and Frank affairs also offer us shockingly unexpected
revelations, bizarre characters, and almost comically complex twists and
turns. Indeed, in all of the affairs an initial and most demanding task, as
I see it, is to offer an overview of their labyrinthine complexities. Still, I
have not slighted the essential facts, for only through them can some
sense of the exquisite ironies and subtleties of the cases be achieved.

What is most significant and, finally, most interesting about the affairs
is not really the sensational details but larger issues. Among them are the
nature and power of modern anti-Semitism, the sometimes tragic conflict
between the freedom of the press and the protection of individual rights,
the genesis of modern mass politics, the reaction of individuals to extreme
situations, and the inevitable ambiguities of campaigns for truth and jus-
tice when political advantage is to be gained from them. I am most of all
concerned to explore the elusive qualities of modern anti-Semitism and
to suggest some revisions of both popular and scholarly beliefs about it.

In that latter regard, these pages try to show (1) how a comparative
approach to the Three Affairs offers perspectives and insights that are
hidden to those who have considered each affair individually, (2) how,
even though these are appropriately termed “anti-Semitic affairs,” the
role of anti-Semitism in them was more ambiguous and less decisive than
generally believed, and (3) how Jews, although unfairly accused and vic-

5Jean-Denis Brelin, L’Affaire (Paris, 1983); English translation, The Affair: The Case of
Alfred Dreyfus (New York, 1986).
timized in these years, were by no means merely passive victims; they fought back against their tormentors and exercised power in ways that are little appreciated. A final concern that connects to each of the above is to examine the interplay of fantasy and reality in modern anti-Semitism: on the one hand, “fantastic” visions, deriving from inherited prejudice and religious imagery of Jewish power and malevolence; on the other, “real” conflict between Jews and non-Jews, related to ordinary competition (economic, social, political).

This effort at historical reinterpretation is less the result of a systematic reconsideration of the relevant primary documents of each case – that would have been a gigantic task – than of a study of the proliferating monographs, articles, and secondary works that touch upon the affairs and the background to them. I have, of course, reexamined many of the primary documents that were of central importance in these affairs, but what is most needed at present is to synthesize the insights of specialists in a range of fields and to make those insights available to a wider audience.

The Dreyfus Affair was the affair. It set the tone for the reaction of contemporaries to the Beilis and Frank affairs, and the treatment of the Dreyfus Affair by many historians has also much influenced how historians, far fewer in number, have interpreted the subsequent two affairs. But in the reactions of contemporaries and of historians to the two later affairs the powerful model of the Dreyfus Affair has involved some important problems, ones that will be more completely scrutinized in subsequent chapters but that may be usefully summarized at this point.

The Dreyfus Affair was seen by many contemporary believers in Dreyfus’s innocence (the Dreyfusards, as they came to be known) as a titanic struggle between the forces of Justice and Injustice, between Truth and Mendacity, between Tolerance and Prejudice, between Progress and Reaction. The term intellectual in France dates from the time of the Affair. It was first used derisively against the Dreyfusards, but they then adopted it, proudly presenting themselves as the voice of reason and intellect over tribalistic instinct.

For many contemporaries the Affair took on the qualities of a medieval morality play, with Good and Evil arrayed starkly against one another, and so also has it been presented by many works of modern history. However, the more one plunges into its mysteries and paradoxes, the more the issue of Good and Evil becomes confused. The morality play turns out to be subtler in its themes than is at first apparent. It emerges

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*N*Probably the most widely read account of the Affair in English, Nicholas Halasz, Captain Dreyfus, the Story of a Mass Hysteria (New York, 1965) is the most striking in this regard, his account offers ample illustration of how an ostensibly factual account can introduce a large element of imaginative rearrangement, of how much history and imaginative fiction have in common. The work will be further discussed below.
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as closer to a modern stage drama, full of ambiguities, uncertainties, and moral dilemmas. We find that the "heroes," even the best of them, are flawed by ignoble instincts and dubious motives. And the "villains" are in some very important cases redeemed by heroic or otherwise estimable traits. Even some of the worst of them were not quite the conniving fiends that a number of accounts would lead us to believe. Mostly we find human beings that are a perplexing mix of sometimes repellent and sometimes admirable qualities, drawn into a vortex of passionate ideological and national allegiances, personal ambitions, lamentable blunders, and plain honest mistakes. So it was, to varying degrees, in all three affairs.

A central theme of the Dreyfus Affair as it will be presented in these pages has little to do with the familiar verities of how good people must struggle against evil ones. It is, rather, that preconceived belief, ideological intoxication, can tragically cloud the mind, weaken the reason, and pervert the moral sense of good people as well as of evil ones. Even otherwise honest and decent people are prone to believe what they want to believe, what they somehow need to believe, and not what a dispassionate examination (however elusive a conception that is) of evidence indicates, above all if such an examination might lead to awkward conclusions.

Belief that is impelled or contorted by desire and psychological need is far more typical than belief that leads to awkward conclusions. It is that latter stance, of embracing the awkward truth no matter what the consequences, that must be considered heroic – and rare. If we are to find heroes, in the most rigorous sense of the word, we must look for those whose personal interests were actually damaged by coming to the rescue of Dreyfus (or Beilis or Frank), not those who perceived personal or political opportunity in taking up the cause of public martyrs. Such heroes are to be found in all the anti-Semitic affairs discussed in this volume but often in some unexpected quarters.

What is an anti-Semitic affair?

My use of the term affair in these pages may require some elucidation, even for those who are familiar with it in application to major political controversies. To borrow from the title of an excellent study of the Dreyfus Affair, it was "more than a trial" 5 – much more, as were the trials of Beilis and Frank. One may, of course, speak of the Dreyfus "case" or the Beilis "case," even of the "cause célèbre" that developed from each of them.

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The thesaurus offers the following as synonyms for affair, contention, struggle, rivalry, quarrel. Each of those terms suggests important aspects of the affairs. “Affair,” then, refers to exceptionally divisive matters, where opposing sides are driven by overpowering emotions. But more important, in an affair issues that transcend the trial itself come into play.

Obviously, a highly emotional response is natural in trials of Jews accused of ritual murder or espionage or murder in the pursuit of perverse sexual gratification, as were Beilis, Dreyfus, and Frank. Murder trials of almost any sort will engage emotions, but they do not usually evoke the kinds of involvement that the Beilis and Frank trials did. Espionage trials invariably provoke widespread, emotional interest, but they do not necessarily become affairs. Even ritual murder trials with Jews as defendants have not usually developed into affairs.

To become an affair, then, a trial must engage powerful and also conflicting emotions in large numbers of people over an extended period. It must attract important numbers of prominent individuals who are willing to devote their energies to winning “justice,” a concept that has diametrically opposed meanings for the opposing sides, since each side sees itself as motivated by selfless, high ideals. An affair must mobilize large numbers of ordinary citizens to the extent that they are willing to sign petitions, attend rallies, or engage in action in the streets. They must passionately believe in the guilt or innocence of the accused and also be persuaded that justice is not being served.

Finally, and most important, for a trial to become an affair it must have ideological implications. It must, in other words, develop into something more than a strictly legal issue of innocence or guilt. Participants in an affair see themselves as selflessly involved in a larger struggle, one that meshes into their general political convictions, into their view of the world. Political parties and interest groups join the fray, as do newspapers and journals, artists and intellectuals, trade union leaders and business executives.

Thus, the trial of the confessed Jewish spy, Jonathan Pollard, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in March 1987 for having passed thousands of top-secret documents to Israeli agents for large sums of money and other perquisites provided by the Israeli government, did not provoke an affair inside the United States. True, many Israelis subsequently elevated him to the status of hero, and some American Jews tried to mobilize opinion against what they perceived as an overly harsh sentence. But his case did not engage a sufficiently large part of the population, pro and con, in the United States for it to be termed an affair as I am using the word."

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The case of the "thrill" murderers, Loeb and Leopold, rich Jews whose guilt was also not in question, did not provoke an anti-Semitic affair. The repulsiveness of their crime, dubbed the "crime of the century" by contemporaries (1924), naturally attracted widespread attention and evoked some anti-Semitic grumblings but no fundamental split in opinion, no mobilized factions, no major ideological linkage, no significant assertion that this was a typically Jewish crime.

Even the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (1951), accused of passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, which did develop into a political affair, still did not become a distinctly anti-Semitic affair. To be sure, it was closer to one than the previous two examples, since in this case the Rosenbergs did not confess to being spies and, more important, many Americans believed that their trial was unfair and that their arrests were tinged with anti-Semitic motivations. That the judge and the chief witness for the prosecution, as well as the prosecuting and defense attorneys in the case, were themselves Jews, and that prominent and influential Jews like Roy Cohn worked with great tenacity to see them convicted and executed, helped to diminish that trial's potential as an anti-Semitic affair. Similarly, that Pollard was spying for a friendly rather than an enemy power helped to diminish the seriousness of his crime in the eyes of most Americans who followed the case. Had he turned the secrets over to Iran or Libya, even if the money paid him had been less than what the Israelis provided, American opinion would almost certainly have turned more strongly against him.

In short, the trials of Jewish criminals, spies, and murderers did not the pages of modern history without developing into anti-Semitic affairs. Often those trials were sensational, the crimes odious, but when the guilt of the defendants was widely recognized by Jew and non-Jew, right and left, when their activities were unable to awaken opposing factions and link to larger issues, no anti-Semitic affair could result.

Themes, interpretations, goals

A larger number of pages in this volume are devoted to the historical background to the Three Anti-Semitic Affairs than to the affairs themselves. I want to make as clear and explicit as possible why I have done so, and why I consider the historical background to be a key part of the contribution of this volume. The most important reason, and the one that is most difficult to put forth briefly, has to do with an issue already

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described as central: the elusive nature of modern anti-Semitism. In particular, how is one to explain outbursts of anti-Semitism in modern times? Are they fundamentally unpredictable and mysterious eruptions, or do they somehow fit into a comprehensible pattern of the past? Is it possible, at least retrospectively, to see anti-Semitic events building in the same way that we can see a revolution or a war building? Was the Dreyfus Affair a "surprise," something that somehow "leaped out" of history, or did it "make sense," given conditions in France in the 1890s?

These questions touch upon tangled controversies in the historical profession, especially among those who write Jewish history, ones that cannot be followed at length here. My position throughout this volume will be that we can understand anti-Semitism in the same way that we can understand other modern isms, and we can understand anti-Semitic events like the Dreyfus Affair, or, indeed, the Holocaust, just as we can understand World War I or the Russian Revolution. The Three Affairs can be set in a historical context that makes them, if not predictable, at least as comprehensible as other events in history. I do not accept that such analysis tends to justify anti-Semitism, as some have maintained, although I do think it often sheds a more textured light on individual anti-Semites, making them appear more a part of the human family, not stick-figures or bogeymen. The idea of trying to shed that kind of light is also regarded with suspicion by many. My belief is that a calm, balanced, and unflinching effort to understand anti-Semitism and anti-Semites is in the long run the best defense against the views they try to propagate. Shrinking from that effort, taking refuge in dogmatic moralizing, finally plays into the hands of anti-Semites, since many of them charge Jews with trying to prevent an honest and objective examination of anti-Semitism.

Yet what it means to "understand" in this regard is admittedly problematic. Many authors who present hatred of Jews as an ultimately mysterious eruption, an effect without understandable causes, are arguing something more plausible and sophisticated: that anti-Semitism itself is fundamentally irrational, a fantasy of twisted minds. Its deepest causes cannot be found in the activities of real Jews but only in baseless fantasies about them. Insofar as anti-Semitism is to be comprehended, it must be through an analysis of the Gentile mind, a dissection of the pathologies of western Christian thought that have over the ages powerfully condi-

7 Robert J. Lifton reports that when he began his study of Nazi doctors, "some [made] ... a compelling case for having the whole subject alone. Their argument was that Nazi evil should merely be recognized and isolated: rather than making it an object of study, one should simply condemn it. Psychological study in particular, it was feared, ran the risk of replacing condemnation with 'insights.'" Robert J. Lifton, The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide (New York, 1996), xi.
tioned non-Jews to hate Jews. "The Jewish Problem is really a Gentile Problem," as a familiar phrase has stated the issue — one-sidedly and simplistically, I believe. Hannah Arendt has called attention, in characteristically mordant tones, to the inclination of some Jewish observers to uphold "the perfect innocence of the [Jewish] victim, an innocence that insinuates not only that no evil was done [by Jews] but that nothing at all was done by them which might possibly have a connection with the issue at stake."

A further refinement of the argument that hatred of Jews is irrational is to be found in some of the most penetrating analyses of modern anti-Semitism, a refinement that seeks to link the twisted minds of individual anti-Semites to what might be termed pathological tendencies in the economy, society, and state of late nineteenth-century Europe and America. These pathological tendencies have, it is argued, intricate connections with capitalist development, with the introduction of modern techniques of production, the overturning of older ways and habits. Europeans and Americans who were threatened by these transformations began to act "hysterically," in the process refashioning centuries-old religious fantasies about Jews into a more modern secular language.

This argument takes on a myriad of forms and degrees of sophistication, but it often comes down to the assertion that the grievances of the "losers" (small shopkeepers, for example) in modern economic development are irrational, in that they represent a past that was doomed by the march of history to disappear. Such tormented and deluded people were drawn to a simple but also false explanation, one derived from fantasy or inherited prejudice: The Jews were the cause of their misfortunes. Anti-Semitism is thus best understood as a spasm of a sick, moribund society, or a death-rattle of doomed classes. Again, although this is a more sophisticated argument, one that I accept to an important extent, I will express reservations about it, especially in its treatment of capitalist development as pathological and in its presentation of the "losers" as wholly irrational.

The background chapters for each of the affairs attempt to give appropriate attention to real historical forces as much as to the fantastic productions of anti-Semitic propagandists. More precisely, these chapters examine the intricate interplay of the two and the important differences in that interplay from country to country over time. As I see it, the most challenging job for the historian is to unravel fantasy and reality, to appreciate how they connect, to evaluate the relative importance of each in given, concrete situations and in historical evolution. I do not belittle the role of irrational hatred, but I will also explore the degree to which hostility to Jews was related to more mundane factors. These are factors

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that led to tension and hostility among other groups in society, without
their being qualified as irrational, fundamentally incomprehensible, or
primarily the product of a powerful and autonomous ideology.

I do not argue, however, that hatred of Jews has been essentially the
same as hatred among other groups in history. Anti-Semitic ideology
derives from a set of images and myths that are central to the identity
of the Judeo-Christian West, ones that have been constantly refashioned
over the centuries. The anti-Jewish hatred that derives from them is at
some level unique and may be said to have a life of its own, however
elusive to define. Nevertheless, developments in the material world have
a decisive impact on the ways those images and myths are refashioned
and thus on the nature of anti-Semitism – and, perhaps most important,
on its concrete implications, for example, in violence against Jews. We
need to understand the myths and the way they are manipulated, their
psychological appeal, but I find the evidence weak that they are essentially
ahistorical, self-perpetuating, or primary movers in history. It is rather
the experiences of real people in the real world that nourish them and
give them life. On the other hand, those experiences not only nourish
anti-Semitic visions but also counter them: When real Jews do not cor-
respond to those visions, which is often the case, the visions are put into
question. That, too, is a major theme of the relations of Jews and non-
Jews in modern times.

A closely related justification for these substantial background chapters
is much easier to provide. My concern is not only with anti-Semitic affairs
but also with what they represented in a broader sense. The interplay of
Jew and Gentile in modern Europe and America is a fascinating and many-
sided story, one that reveals the nature of modern times in graphic and
unaccustomed ways. I conceive of this as a work of comparative history,
one that seeks to gain insights into the histories of given nations (French,
Russian, and American primarily, but also Hungarian, German, and Aus-
trian) in the light of contrasting national development. One particularly
revealing way of looking at national development, I believe, is in terms
of how nations respond to the presence of Jews within their borders and
how Jews define themselves as citizens of those nations. This approach
provides a special kind of window, revealing crucial differences that may
not appear so sharply when one looks at a set of countries from other
perspectives. However, not only differences emerge; similarities between
countries so ostensibly dissimilar as the United States and Russia also
become apparent. And it is these similarities, I believe, that have been
overlooked or at times purposely obscured. In this, and in a number of
other ways, I think the reader will easily perceive how this work deals
with much more than the Three Affairs.
The rise of the Jews in the nineteenth century

Late nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, and the relationships of Jews and non-Jews more generally, cannot be understood without an appreciation of what will hereafter be referred to as the “rise of the Jews” in Europe and America. Anti-Semites, of course, perceived rising Jews as a kind of specter, and those perceptions had interesting parallels to the fears in other quarters of a rising working class or a rising Germany. Obviously, in the Jewish case it was a restricted and paradoxical rise, one that stood in marked contrast to the suddenly revealed vulnerability of Jews implicit in the title of this work, “The Jew Accused.”

The rise was nonetheless real and historically significant. The material comfort and social success of Jews, the emergence of a numerous Jewish bourgeoisie in western Europe and the United States by the late nineteenth century, were part of a remarkable ascendance of the Jews since the late eighteenth century, when they began to achieve civil equality. Relevant statistics and other details of this rise will be provided in subsequent chapters, but it is clear that in the long history of the Jews, the rise of the Jews in the nineteenth century has few parallels in terms of the rapid transformation of the condition of Jews—in absolute and relative numbers, in wealth, in fame, in power, and in influence. Jewish ascendance in Hellenistic Alexandria or in Golden Age Spain obviously suggest themselves as comparable, but the modern rise was almost certainly more important. The extraordinary energy emanating from the Jewish people as a whole, and, more palpably, from countless prominent individuals of Jewish background, is one of the most important and often overlooked phenomena of modern times.

Some Gentiles welcomed this rise; some opposed it. Others, probably the majority, remained ambivalent if they noticed it, as many obviously did not. Whether they finally welcomed or opposed it depended very much on the specific shape it assumed in individual countries, as well as on the culture and traditions of those countries—and, indeed, on turns of events that must be termed historical accidents. But had this rise of the Jews not occurred, there would not have been modern anti-Semitism in the specific forms it assumed from country to country in the last decades