



Alfred Dreyfus, circa 1894

# Herzl and Zionism, from France to Britain

The epic story of how two officers, Alfred Dreyfus and Albert Goldsmid, impacted the visionary of the Jewish state

By Gol Kaleb

**TWO ASSIMILATED** Jews who were high-ranking European officers had a profound effect on Theodor Herzl, in the early stages of Zionism as his ideas were fermenting in his mind.

One was Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jewish officer who in December 1894 was convicted of treason. Herzl never met Dreyfus, but carefully watched him during the trial, which he covered as the Paris correspondent of the Viennese newspaper, *Neue Freie Presse* (New Free Press.)

The other was Col. Albert Goldsmid, a British Jewish officer whom Herzl met about a year later in November 1895. A few months after their dramatic meeting, Herzl unveiled his Zionist philosophy to the world, and in February 1896 published “The Jewish State.”

The two Jewish officers represented opposite bookends of assimilated European

Jews’ attitudes toward Jewish nationalism. Dreyfus rejected it, Goldsmid embraced it.

Both Dreyfus and Goldsmid were devout patriots, serving their respective countries. They were among the highest-ranking Jews ever to serve in a European army.

Herzl himself came from a family of patriots, who demonstrated strong multi-generational loyalty to the Austrian monarch, including by helping the Austrian war effort against the Turks. Such patriotism was rewarded in 1857 by Austrian Kaiser Franz Joseph, who gave Herzl’s ancestors permission to purchase land throughout the empire.

Herzl addressed such Jewish patriotism in his writings: “In vain are we loyal patriots, our loyalty in some places running to extremes; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow-citizens; in vain do we strive to increase the

fame of our native land in science and art, or her wealth by trade and commerce.”

Herzl was not alone in his thinking. Historian Michael Marrus argues that patriotism was the cornerstone of newly emancipated European Judaism and that it received encouragement from the highest Jewish religious officials, such as the Grand Rabbi of France.

Herzl noted how such patriotism was utterly rejected by Europeans. “In countries where we have lived for centuries we are still cried down as strangers,” he said. “It is useless, therefore, for us to be loyal patriots, as were the Huguenots who were forced to emigrate.”

Indeed, the French rejected Dreyfus’s patriotism as they rejected the Huguenot Protestants centuries earlier. In what was to become one of the most horrific acts of state-sponsored antisemitism spanning

multiple levels of the French government, military, press, the French Catholic church and Parisian society, the Jewish officer was falsely accused of treason against France.

France's dismissal of Dreyfus's patriotism came in spite of his demonstration of passionate loyalty to France. Like many in the French military at the time, Dreyfus was from Alsace. When the French lost that territory to Germany in the 1870 war, his family opted against staying in their home under German occupation, and instead chose to become "refugees," eventually moving to Paris.

Dreyfus rejected the idea of Jewish nationalism, just as he rejected Jewish religiosity. He was a cosmopolitan Frenchman, living a life of luxury in Paris in the 16th Arrondissement near Trocadero Square, dwelling in the Parisian society of the Belle-Epoque.

Goldsmid was a different type of assimilated Jew. Raised as a Christian in a British military family in India, Goldsmid discovered his Jewish ancestry when he was a teenager, and eventually converted to Judaism. The astonishing thing was the manner in which Goldsmid connected back to Judaism – not through the Jewish religion itself as much as through his strong sense of Jewish nationalism.

Goldsmid was a Victorian-era British gentleman, an alumnus of Sandhurst Military Academy. His conversion to Judaism was not a rejection of Christianity, but rather a return to the people he felt a part of.

"I am Daniel Deronda," he told Herzl in an emotional late-night confession, referring to George Eliot's novel about a man who discovers his Jewish roots, converts back to Judaism and is set to fulfil

the dream of the return of the Jews to their land. Goldsmid, who was the regional commander in Cardiff, Wales, hosted Herzl in his home for dinner. This November 1895 encounter left a powerful mark on Herzl, who at the time was under intense pressure to abort his plans to publish "The Jewish State" and abandon his dreams. Herzl presented Goldsmid with his Zionist vision-in-the-making, and unlike many others, Goldsmid got it and jumped on board. "That is the idea of my life!" he told Herzl.

Herzl may have possibly noticed the contrast: Dreyfus rejected Jewish nationalism as he viewed it to be in conflict with his French patriotism; Goldsmid embraced Jewish nationalism as he viewed it as a strong expression of his British patriotism.

This, to a large extent, was a reflection of contrasting French and British attitudes toward Jewish nationalism.

France was the first in Europe to give Jews rights, but demanded a heavy price in return. The Jews were expected to disavow their national Jewish identity as a condition to obtaining their liberties.

But the French Jews' rejection of Jewish nationalism did not matter. The French viewed Dreyfus as part of the Jewish nation and as someone who would naturally act to promote Jewish interests, not French interests. Such accusations were expressed through official government documents, press articles and cartoons portraying Dreyfus in cahoots with religious Orthodox Jews, assimilated Jews, poor Eastern European ghetto Jews and rich Jews alike.

While France expected Jews to strip off their Jewish national identity as the price for inclusion, they never believed that the



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Col. Albert Goldsmid

Jews actually did that. The Jews of France were viewed like the Marranos of Spain before the Inquisition – secretly practicing their Jewish nationalism.

This French practice, by the way, was to be repeated 150 years later with the French Muslims, whom the French once again ask to shed their Muslim characteristics as the price for inclusion. (Just like with the Huguenots in the 17th century and the Jews in the 19th century, this too seems to be in vain, as many French citizens reject Muslims outright.)

Britain provides the polar opposite. Not only was the British environment supportive of Jewish nationalism, during the 19th century, the dream of Jewish restoration to their land was highly popular throughout British society, government and the military. The British consul general in Jerusalem even took on the role of representing the Jews in dealing with the Ottoman rulers. "England the Great, England the Free, England with its eyes on the Seven Seas, will understand us," predicted Herzl, and he was correct. Britain enthusiastically endorsed Zionism.

Therefore, it was no surprise that the British welcomed Goldsmid's own embrace of Jewish nationalism. Goldsmid was a proud member of Hovevei Zion ("Lovers of Zion") and of the Maccabim Club in London. Encouraged by Queen Victoria's son, Prince Arthur, Goldsmid took leave in 1892 to infuse Jewish nationalism into the Jewish settlements in

Argentina – a “nursery ground for Palestine” – as Goldsmid called them.

The differences between France and Britain observed by Herzl were not limited to attitudes toward Jewish nationalism. Herzl likely also noticed the two countries’ opposing reaction to defeat.

Revanchism (the political manifestation of the will to reverse territorial losses) was a predominant sentiment in France of the late 19th century during Herzl’s tenure in Paris. The desire to avenge Germany for the humiliating defeat in the 1870 war led France to engage in an intense military buildup, which in turn was a primary contributor to World War I (and indirectly to World War II).

The ethos of late 19th-century France was much about amassing hate for Germany, about conflict perpetuation, about not letting go. Children were taught in schools about German atrocities and a generation of Frenchmen was raised with the incitement of a built-in call to arms: Revenge!

For Britain, on the other hand, the 19th century was an era of acceptance. The humiliating defeat in America was followed by adapting the key principle: If you can’t beat them, join them. Indeed, the US-UK special relation became a core asset of both countries, and remains a cornerstone of the two countries’ global might. (Incidentally, many of the Huguenots deported by France moved to America and to Britain, and became devout patriots in their new homes.)

**THESE DIVERGING** attitudes continue to have an impact on Zionism today. France, along with the European Union, plays a crucial role in aggressively dissuading Palestinians from accepting their defeat in 1948. By providing financial and political support to organizations that perpetuate the conflict, such as UNRWA, and acting in the international community to promote Palestinian victimhood, France and Europe have been robbing the Palestinians of the option to “go British,” and join the astonishing success of the Jewish state.

When Israelis and Palestinians got together in September 2018 in the settlement-city of Ariel to promote joint business initiatives, they were strongly supported by the United States. France and the EU invest resources in sabotaging such initiatives, including through the EU’s neocolonialist product-labeling directive of 2015, which targets Jewish-owned

businesses that could employ Palestinians. Some 150 years since revanchism became a dominant sentiment in French politics, it is once again emerging in French and European behavior – only this time, Europeans are ready to fight until the last drop of Palestinian blood, as they themselves peacefully bask in the cafés of Brussels and Paris.

Herzl envisioned Arabs in Palestine being avid Zionists, incorporated into society and enjoying full rights. Indeed, just as he predicted, Arab leaders such as Emir Faisal – the king of Syria and later Iraq – were natural supporters of Zionism early on. But Herzl, who was a Francophile, did not anticipate the destructive intervention of France and Europe.

**HERZL DIED** in 1904. Shortly thereafter, Dreyfus was fully acquitted. Dreyfus, whose French loyalty never swayed, refused to become a Dreyfusard – the coalition of those who took on his cause. He remained a proud Frenchman, an officer and a patriot. Eight years after his exoneration, Dreyfus got to participate in what he and France had waited to do for over 40 years: Take revenge against Germany!

Dreyfus fought in World War I, which delivered a devastating blow to Germany, and forced it to accept full blame for the war, as well as leading to the reconquering of Alsace, Dreyfus’s childhood home.

Goldsmid, on the other hand, spent the early 20th century pursuing more peaceful activities, while continuing to promote Jewish nationalism. He founded the British Jewish Lads Brigade, a group of youth who saw no conflict between their British patriotism and Jewish nationalism. This effort was an indirect contributor to the establishment of the Jewish Brigade in the British army during World War I, which in turn was instrumental in the establishment of a defense force in what was to become the Jewish state that Herzl envisioned.

Indeed, one of the founders of the British Jewish Brigade, Joseph Trumpeldor, was dispatched in late 1919 to defend the Jewish village of Tel Chai, which was caught in the crossfire between France and the Arabs, following France’s takeover of the surrounding territory. The Jews attempted to stay neutral and on good terms with their Arab neighbors, and some historians blame the French for the sequence of events that led to the

first casualties in the Arab-Jewish violence, among them British army veteran, Capt. Trumpeldor.

Dreyfus died in 1935 as a proud French patriot, but his death did not put an end to the suffering of his family nor of other patriotic French Jews.

During World War II, Germany identified the intensity and permanency of Jew-hatred throughout Europe and leveraged such anti-Jewish sentiments to score favors with local populations in countries it invaded. In spite of Dreyfus’s and other Jews’ extraordinary contribution to French culture, science, art, commerce, medicine and national security, France turned against the Jews yet again. Less than 50 years after assaulting the Jews through the Dreyfus affair, many French participated in the slaughter of French Jews. Dreyfus’s granddaughter was among the victims, sent to her death for the same heinous crime of which her grandfather was convicted – for being Jewish.

In contrast, Herzl’s only grandson, Stephen Norman, followed in the footsteps of Goldsmid and fought in the British Army during World War II, rising to the respectable rank of an Artillery captain (ironically, the same rank as Dreyfus at the time of his arrest).

When the war ended, Norman was sent to Washington to serve in the British economic mission to the United States. Eager to reunite with his parents who were in Austria during the war, Norman awaited word of their fate. But just like Dreyfus’s granddaughter, Herzl’s remaining daughter and her husband were also guilty of that same hideous crime – being Jewish. They too were sent to their death. Upon learning the devastating news about his parents, Norman walked to the Massachusetts Avenue bridge and jumped to his death, ending the lineage of Theodor Herzl.

Yet the gift of Herzl lives on. The astonishing success of the Jewish state he envisioned is a testament to unapologetic Jewish nationalism and to its rightful place among the world’s nations. The Jewish state’s might, morality and immense contributions to humanity also convey the ultimate proclamation to Europeans and others that after 2,000 years, being Jewish is no longer a hideous crime. ■

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