

Nation States and International Tensions |

Sample answer

What was the impact of anti-Semitism in France and Russia 1871-1920? (2014)

There was heavy anti-Semitic sentiment in France and Russia during this period. This can be seen in the controversial trials of Alfred Dreyfus and Mende Beilis, along with events such as the 'Panama Scandal.' Anti-Semitism also took the form of horrific pogroms in Russia, where discriminatory anti-Semitic policies were enacted, such as the May Laws.

Anti-Semitism in France increased dramatically in 1882, after the collapse of the bank 'Union Générale.' Jewish bankers of 'Union Générale' were immediately blamed for the bank's collapse without hesitation by the French public. The French journalist and writer Édouard Drumont used this event as an opportunity to begin an anti-Semitic campaign. By 1886, he had published a book titled, 'La France Juive.' This was a deeply anti-Semitic book, which claimed that Jewish people were destroying the traditional values and way of life in France. It was extremely popular, and sold more than 100,000 copies. The book's popularity highlights the rampant anti-Semitism in French society at the time, and how people were ready to blame Jews whenever the occasion arose.

Drumont received even more anti-Semitic support when the Panama Canal Company went bankrupt in 1889. This event is also known as the 'Panama Affair.' More than 800,000 investors lost their life savings due to this bankruptcy. It was eventually revealed that more than 150 members of the French government had been bribed to hide the company's bankruptcy from the public. Two Jewish men, Dr. Cornelius Hertz and Baron Joseph Reinach were accused of bribing these members of government. The scandal increased anti-Semitism in France, aided by Drumont's newspaper 'La Libre Parole,' which blamed Jewish people for the scandal.

In 1884, Alfred Dreyfus was arrested. This was to become known as the infamous 'Dreyfus Affair.' Dreyfus was a young captain in the army of Jewish descent, and was accused of sharing military secrets with Germany. A collection of documents called the 'Bordereau' was the main basis of evidence in the trial. It was thought the handwriting on these documents was Dreyfus' although there was no date or signature. Handwriting experts were unable to say whose handwriting it was, and Dreyfus was sentenced to life imprisonment on 'Devil's Island' in South America regardless.

This case was reopened in 1896, when Colonel Piquart discovered the handwriting on the 'Bordereau' was fabricated by Major Esterhazy. This discovery was dismissed by the military court, who refused to reopen the case to protect their reputation. Piquart was immediately discharged from the military, and the case was swept under the carpet. By now the case had caused massive controversy. French society was divided by people who supported Dreyfus, who tended to be more liberal, (called 'Dreyfusards') and those who were more right-wing, ('Anti-Dreyfusards.')

That same year, the journalist Emile Zola published the letter 'J'Accuse' in the newspaper 'L'Aurore,' revealing that the military had covered up the truth in the case. Zola also published the names of military members who had been involved in this, and Major Esterhazy himself came forward to admit his guilt. Zola was accused of criminal libel, and fled to England to escape persecution. The military was now under immense pressure to reopen the case. In 1899, the Minister of War publicly announced they had received new evidence proving that Dreyfus was guilty without doubt. However, this backfired when Colonel Henry admitted that he had created this 'new evidence.' Despite this admission, Dreyfus was still considered guilty, although his sentence was reduced by 10 years.

To prevent more social conflict, the President of France decided to grant Dreyfus a pardon on condition that he admitted he was guilty. By 1906, Dreyfus had been broken down by the case, and accepted the offer. He returned to military service as a major, and was awarded the highest

honour in France, 'Legion d'Honneur' before his death in 1935. The case lasted 12 years, and highlights the high level of anti-Semitism in French society at the time.

Anti-Semitism was prevalent in Russia for hundreds of years, however it had never been established as a governmental policy until the after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. A young Jewish revolutionary named Hesya Helfmann was implicated in the assassination, which the government used to begin their anti-Semitic campaign in Russia. This resulted in widespread violence, terror, death, and rape in the Pale area. The Pale was where 5 million Jews were forced to live, also known as the 'Pale of Settlement.'

Konstantin Pobedonostev was the primary force behind this brutal anti-Semitic campaign. He was a conservative statesman in charge of the Russian Orthodox Church, and advisor to Tsar Alexander III. He was a deeply anti-Semitic man and stated, "One third of the Jews in Russia must die, one third emigrate, and one third assimilate." He used the Jews as a shared enemy and scapegoat to unite Russia. By 1882, he had introduced the May Laws. These were highly discriminatory laws that forbid the Jews to settle outside the Pale and reduced the number of Jews allowed to attend schools and universities. It also severely limited local Jewish voting rights and made admission to professions such as medicine or law extremely difficult.

The Russian government also supported violent anti-Semitic attacks and massacres, which were known as 'pogroms.' The government considered pogroms as acts of patriotism and allowed them to distract people from the fact that Tsar Alexander III's reign was failing. The first pogroms began in 1881 after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and continued on a regular basis. Up to 1905 a right-wing nationalist group called the 'Black Hundred' was responsible for the majority of these brutal pogroms. It is estimated that over 70,000 Jewish men, women, and children were massacred in such pogroms during the period 1881-1920.

The trial of Mendel Beilis in 1911 is another example of anti-Semitism in Russia. Beilis was a Jewish factory worker accused of ritually murdering a thirteen- year old boy called Andrei Yuschinsky. Posters were distributed all over the country spreading anti-Semitic propaganda. It

was alleged that the boy's post-mortem report had been adjusted to suit the facts of the case, but Mendel was still held guilty despite having a strong alibi and evidence he had been at work at the time of murder. It was also discovered witnesses had been bribed by the secret police to provide false statements. The jury consisted of Cristian members only, seven of whom were members of the Black Hundred. The real murderers of Yuschinsky were eventually identified, however Beilis was still considered guilty. The trial lasted five years and was followed worldwide. It resulted in heavy criticism of the Russian Empire, and divided Russian society in a similar way to the infamous 'Dreyfus Affair' in France. The bias of the Beilis trial shows the high level of anti-Semitism and prejudice in Russia during this period.

In answer to the widespread anti-Semitic violence, hatred, and persecution in Europe, many Jews moved to the west of Europe or America. Nearly 200,000 Jewish refugees from eastern Europe settled in Britain from 1870-1914. They worked in jobs such as tailors, tinkers, and cabinet makers, etc. Many would join revolutionary movements in the future. The influential Jewish activist Theodor Herzl founded the Zionist Organization in 1897. This aimed to establish a 'legally assured home' for Jews in response to the longterm anti-Semitic persecution in Europe. Eventually the State of Israel was established in 1948, as the first Jewish State in 2000 years.

The high levels of anti-Semitism in France and Russia are clearly seen in the trials of Alfred Dreyfus and Mende Beilis, along with other controversial events such as the 'Panama Scandal.' Anti-Semitism was also highly prevalent in Russia, as seen in its discriminatory anti-Semitic policies, such as the May Laws, and the emergence of pogroms and general anti-Semitic violence. This would eventually result in many Jews choosing to emigrate due to continued persecution in Europe, and the eventual establishment of a Jewish state.

