

# Calling All People of Principle

Where are the men and women of courage and moral clarity, like Émile Zola, who recognize biblical scapegoating in the world's condemnation of Israel?

**Thane Rosenbaum**

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Sometimes a coincidence becomes kismet—like my recently published book “Beyond Proportionality: Israel’s Just War in Gaza,” and Roman Polanski’s film “An Officer and a Spy,” released six years ago in France as “J’Accuse,” but which has finally made it to America, completing a two-week run at the Film Forum in Manhattan.

Both the movie, and the opening paragraphs of my book, recall the tragic fate of a Jewish military officer accused of a crime he did not commit—and its cosmic relevance today, given the equally depraved indictments against the Jewish state.

Whether the film will be screened in Los Angeles or made available on digital platforms is still unknown. Back in 2019 when the film premiered, the César Awards (the French Oscars) and the European Film Awards showered it with praise—but not without public controversy.

Polanski, too, faced the career-shattering consequences of #MeToo, another example of personal misconduct—in some cases merely alleged—forever tarnishing once-treasured artistic achievements.

Polanski's life, as a child survivor of the Holocaust, had been grotesquely upended once more when his wife and unborn child were murdered by the Manson Family in a 1969 Los Angeles home invasion. In 1977, Polanski was arrested for statutory rape of a 13-year-old. He fled the United States for Europe when a judge planned to ignore a plea deal and sentence Polanski to decades in prison. He is today, at 92, still a fugitive from American justice.

And that's why cinephiles may never see "An Officer and a Spy." Cancel culture remains very much in business. His art sabotaged by a scandal unrelated to its creation. Missing out on this film, however, is a shame—and not one without contemporary relevance.

Polanski is a singular talent. "Chinatown," "Rosemary's Baby" and "Tess" are among his directorial credits. Perhaps more so than with "The Pianist," his acclaimed Holocaust film, "An Officer and a Spy" is, for him, an even more personal movie.

Without overt embellishments, "An Officer and a Spy" speaks directly to Polanski's often obscured Jewish ancestry. It casts a light onto an epochal antisemitic moment in world history, one not unlike what we are witnessing today. The infamous Dreyfus Affair, which took place in France from 1894-1906, radiated Jew-hatred around the Western world—especially among artists, students, and the impolite company of the allegedly refined.

Sound familiar? The world's hysteria-fueled reaction to Israel's war in Gaza—fought in self-defense, against terrorists who refuse to surrender or

return hostages while continuing to target Israeli civilians and use their own as human shields (war crimes that go blithely unnoticed), has granted a license to malign Israel and attack Jews wherever they might be.

Alfred Dreyfus, a captain on the French Army's General Staff, was framed as having sold state secrets to a German military attaché. The evidence against him was preposterous. Nonetheless he was convicted as a traitor, stripped of his rank and shipped off to a prison on Devil's Island to serve a life sentence. Headlines of a treasonous Jew sparked waves of antisemitic fervor worldwide.

A high-ranking officer in the French military, Georges Picquart, newly appointed as chief of intelligence, took a fresh look at the evidence against Dreyfus only to discover its relative nonexistence. The military had settled on Dreyfus not because of his guilt but because, as a Jew, he was an easy target.

Picquart further discovered that confining Dreyfus to Devil's Island did nothing to arrest Germany's espionage against the French. The real traitor was still loose among France's military ranks. When Picquart found him, however, his superiors refused to admit their error. The surge of antisemitism kept everyone occupied. Why ruin a good thing?

Lieutenant Colonel Picquart was no natural friend of Jews, or especially fond of Dreyfus. The Jewish soldier was once one of his students at the military academy. But Picquart was a man of conscience. He joined a small group of patriots who believed in Dreyfus' innocence, among whom was

France's leading public intellectual, Émile Zola. Zola penned a front-page essay, "*J'Accuse*," in France's leading newspaper, exposing the military's corruption and cover-up.

The French military refused to buckle. Zola was successfully prosecuted for libel and fled to England. Picquart, who testified for Zola, was sentenced to prison for insubordination. Dreyfus was returned to Paris for a re-trial, only to be convicted all over again.

As with most miscarriages of justice, truth ultimately prevails. The French military command resigned in disgrace. Dreyfus was exonerated, promoted to lieutenant colonel and served in World War I. Picquart was appointed Minister of War. Zola, however, the most pivotal of Dreyfus' champions, died under suspicious circumstances soon after leaving France.

In "An Officer and a Spy," Polanski focuses his lens almost entirely on the principled stand and selfless risk undertaken by Picquart. The film strays from earlier biopics that handed out heroism more even-handedly, such as "The Life of Emile Zola" (1937), and the HBO movie "Prisoner of Honor" (1991) (starring Richard Dreyfuss, as Picquart).

Ironically, the father of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, was in Paris reporting on the trials for an Austrian newspaper. So shaken was he by the outrageous railroading of a Jew and the tumultuous rioting that followed, it convinced him of the urgency for a Jewish homeland. The Dreyfus Affair foreshadowed greater calamities to come—the Holocaust, for instance — and inspired Herzl to publish "The State of the Jews," in 1896.

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Today, that state, which became Israel in 1948, is being subjected to global lies as malignant as the one that animated the Dreyfus Affair: The Jewish captain was not a spy; and the Jewish state is committing neither genocide nor mass starvation.

I begin “Beyond Proportionality” with the Dreyfus Affair because it is unmistakably reminiscent of the heady and heated Jew-hatred we are experiencing today.

The commonalities are stark: Rageful mania on campuses and city streets. Desecration of Jewish landmarks and businesses. Violence against Jews far from the events in Gaza. Blatant lying and covering up evidence of Hamas’ barbarism, its flouting of the laws of war, the complicity of bad actors, like the United Nations and mainstream media, and the deliberate discounting of Israel’s manifold efforts to preserve Palestinian life.

“An Officer and a Spy” was completed long before the massacre on October 7, 2023, and its scandalous aftermath. One doubts that Polanski would have filmed it differently as an allegory for this latest iteration of the world’s always impassioned, easily ignitable hatred of Jews.

But the more fundamental question is: Where are the men and women of courage and moral clarity, like Zola, who recognize biblical scapegoating in the world's condemnation of Israel? Where are the antisemites, like Picquart, who nonetheless will not tolerate the injustice of political persecution?

Where are the people of good faith who demand holding Hamas accountable, and who rightly regard pro-Hamas sentiments as nothing more than morality forsaken and Jew-hatred run amok?

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