

An Officer and a Spy

Robert Harris. (Knopf, 2014) 429 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

The Dreyfus Affair has all the ingredients of a great novel. The case of a Jewish army captain, Alfred Dreyfus, who had been wrongly convicted of espionage in a rigged trial, consumed French political and intellectual life in the late 1890s. One of the central figures in the case was another army officer, Col. Georges Picquart, who found the evidence that exonerated Dreyfus and pointed to the true traitor. His sense of honor trumping his personal anti-Semitism, Picquart joined the fight to clear Dreyfus, only to be framed, jailed, and cashiered from the French army. In the end, however, Dreyfus was cleared and Picquart was reinstated as a brigadier general and later appointed minister of war.^a

An Officer and a Spy is Robert Harris's fictionalization of the Dreyfus Affair from Picquart's vantage point. In his previous books, Harris, a British journalist turned thriller writer, has shown a talent for using clever plotting, interesting characters, and meticulous research to produce historical novels that are hard to put down. Here, Harris starts with Picquart and then works in appearances by other figures from the Affair, ranging from future French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau to the informants and minor spies employed by French military counter-intelligence, and vividly evokes the sights, sounds, and smells of belle époque Paris. His Picquart is a multidimensional man, intelligent and cultured, and in love with all that Paris has to offer, including his mistress, Pauline, the wife of a French diplomat. The result is a textured, nuanced book that brings a vanished world to life.

Unfortunately, however, *An Officer and a Spy* does not succeed as an espionage thriller. Part of the problem is that the story has little tension. Harris takes his time developing the plot, but most readers already know how it turns out. As a result, the pacing seems slow and the read-

er finds himself impatiently urging Harris to get on with it. The sense that the book moves slowly is exacerbated by Harris's commitment to authenticity—he does not compress the timeline, and the characters have to speak their true lines, even if doing so in the formal style of the times makes the dialog seem stilted to our ears.

The book's other problem is that Picquart is not a strong enough character to carry the story. Picquart, both in real life and in Harris's portrayal, was smart and driven by a strong sense of honor and duty.^b Otherwise, however, he was a colorless military bureaucrat who wanted to advance his career but had no grand ambitions for his service. "I have no wish to destroy my career," Picquart says as he debates what to do with the mounting evidence of Dreyfus's innocence. (201) His career is, of course, derailed but his suffering is minimal—several months in a military jail and then, after his discharge, a comfortable life with family, friends, and mistress—and evokes little sympathy.

Heroes in espionage novels are interesting when they are decisive, but Picquart always remains the ambivalent and cautious staff officer. Harris's rendering of the man is accurate, but leaves an emptiness at the core of the book and makes it hard to care about him. In the last pages of *An Officer and a Spy*, Dreyfus asks Picquart for the promotions he would have received had he not been imprisoned. Picquart, despite having received his retroactive promotions, refuses: "It is politically impossible," he tells Dreyfus, as he cannot afford to open old wounds. (424) This is the classic response of a gray man, not of one whose experiences have enhanced his self-awareness or given him a commitment to a cause greater than himself.



a. For a more detailed summary of the Dreyfus Affair, see John Ehrman, "The Lessons for CI of the Dreyfus Affair," *Studies in Intelligence* 55 No. 1 (March 2011).

b. In developing the character, Harris seems to have relied heavily on historian Ruth Harris's account of the Affair and her portrait of Picquart. See Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century* (Metropolitan Books, 2010).

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