

CHAPTER  
**26**  
Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from Five Years of My Life,*  
*1894–1899*  
by Alfred Dreyfus

*In 1894 Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, was convicted of treason for allegedly selling military secrets to Germany. He was condemned to solitary confinement in prison for life but later released after new evidence showed that he had been framed by other officers. In this excerpt from his autobiographical account, Dreyfus recalls part of his sentence, a public degradation held on January 5, 1895. What emotions did Dreyfus experience during his degradation?*

The degradation took place Saturday, the 5th of January. I underwent the horrible torture without weakness.

Before the ceremony, I waited for an hour in the hall of the garrison adjutant at the École Militaire, guarded by the captain of gendarmes, Lebrun-Renault. During these long minutes I gathered up all the forces of my being. The memory of the dreadful months which I had just passed came back to me, and in broken sentences I recalled to the captain the last visit which Commandant du Paty de Clam had made me in my prison. I protested against the vile accusation which had been brought against me; I recalled that I had written again to the Minister to tell him of my innocence. . . .

After this I was marched to the center of the square, under a guard of four men and a corporal.

Nine o'clock struck. General Darras, commanding the parade, gave the order to carry arms.

I suffered agonizingly, but held myself erect with all my strength. To sustain me I called up the memory of my wife and children.

As soon as the sentence had been read out, I cried aloud, addressing myself to the troops:

“Soldiers, they are degrading an innocent man. Soldiers, they are dishonoring an innocent man. *Vive la France, vive l’armée!*”

A sergeant of the Republican Guard came up to me. He tore off rapidly buttons, trousers-stripes, the signs of my rank from cap and sleeves, and then broke my sword across his knee. I saw all these material emblems of my honor fall at my feet. Then, my whole being racked by a fearful paroxysm, but with body erect and head high, I shouted again and again to the soldiers and to the assembled crowd the cry of my soul.

“I am innocent!”

The parade continued. I was compelled to make

the whole round of the square. I heard the howls of a deluded mob, I felt the thrill which I knew must be running through those people, since they believed that before them was a convicted traitor to France; and I struggled to transmit to their hearts another thrill,—belief in my innocence.

The round of the square made, the torture would be over, I believed.

But the agony of that long day was only beginning.

They tied my hands, and a prison van took me to the *Dépôt* (Central Prison of Paris), passing over the Alma Bridge. On coming to the end of the bridge, I saw through the tiny grating of my compartment in the van the windows of the home where such happy years of my life had been spent, where I was leaving all my happiness behind me. My grief bowed me down.

At the Central Prison, in my torn and stripped uniform, I was dragged from hall to hall, searched, photographed, and measured. At last, toward noon, I was taken to the Santé Prison and shut up in a convict’s cell.

*from Alfred Dreyfus, Five Years of My Life, 1894–1899*  
(New York: McClure, 1901), 49–52. Reprinted in Louis L. Snyder, *The Dreyfus Case: A Documentary History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 34–36.

## Discussion Questions

### Determining Main Ideas

1. What happened to Dreyfus during the degradation ceremony?
2. How did Dreyfus react to the degradation?
3. **Making Predictions** Do you think Dreyfus was able to convince the crowd of his innocence as he was paraded through the square? Give specific reasons to support your answer.