

Dreyfus, Myasoyedov, Abilov and Samadov or the act of “betraying” the state

written by BRI Political Studies Group BAI Siyasi Araşdırmalar Qrupu

In the summer of 2024, two researchers in Azerbaijan were arrested one after another. These were Iqbal Abilov, a former lecturer at Belarus State University, and Behruz Samadov, a doctoral student at Charles University in the Czech Republic. They were arrested under Article 274 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan, which concerns high treason. The court found both researchers guilty. It sentenced Abilov to eighteen years in prison and sentenced Samadov to fifteen years. On social media one part of the public openly states that it does not believe these accusations. Another part states that it believes them, or we can assume that it presents itself as if it believes them. I will not address the charges brought against Abilov or Samadov or the degree of transparency in the investigation and the trial or whether the proceedings complied with the Criminal Procedure Code (see Baku Research Institute’s comprehensive analysis of the Samadov case).[\[1\]](#) Our aim is to recall two well-known historical trials that caused divisions in society just as the Abilov and Samadov cases have. These are the Dreyfus and Myasoyedov affairs. We aim to clarify which values shape the positions of those who believe high treason accusations and those who do not.

The trials concerning treason charges against Dreyfus in France during the Third Republic, and against Myasoyedov in the Russian Empire during the First World War created strong reactions among politicians and intellectuals. The Dreyfus case split French intellectuals and politicians into two camps. One group stated that the court had not proved that

Dreyfus had betrayed the state. This group therefore did not believe that he was a traitor. The other group deemed that those who did not believe the court decision had betrayed national interests. This group stated that the lack of evidence was not important and that portraying Dreyfus as a traitor served national interests. In Russia, the situation was reversed. A group of politicians and officers launched a smear campaign against Myasoyedov before any official charge was brought against him. Intellectuals avoided expressing opinions on the matter. In both states, a group of politicians and intellectuals knew that the treason charge was false. They still stated publicly that they believed the accusation because they sought to protect their personal interests.

Alfred Dreyfus: An act of treason in France

In 1894, the French army charged Alfred Dreyfus, a thirty-five-year-old artillery captain of Jewish origin, with sending secret information to the German Embassy in Paris. He received a life sentence. He was sent to the prison on Bagne de Cayenne, an island known as Devil's Island. He was kept in extremely harsh conditions. Two years after his conviction a French army officer, Lieutenant Colonel Marie Georges Picquart, discovered that the real traitor was Major Charles Ferdinand Esterhazy of the French army. Picquart reported this to the General Staff. The army generals, a group of politicians and the General Staff refused to reassess the verdict even though they knew that the charges against Dreyfus were fabricated. They continued to accuse Dreyfus. They protected the real spy. A two-day trial took place. Because of pressure from high-ranking officers, the court acquitted Esterhazy. The authorities then brought new charges against Dreyfus based on falsified documents. In the same year, the well-known French literary critic Bernard Lazare published a pamphlet titled *Judicial Error: The Truth About the Dreyfus Case*. Lazare feared that the French police would confiscate the pamphlet. Because of this fear, he published it not in France but in Belgium. Lazare refuted each accusation brought

against Dreyfus one by one. He proved that the accusations had no basis. Lazare stressed that the Dreyfus case was not a simple judicial error. He stated that it was a deliberate attempt to destroy an innocent man.[\[2\]](#)

Two years after this event, the well-known French writer of Jewish origin Emile Zola wrote an open letter titled *J'Accuse...!* to the President of France Felix Faure. He accused the government of antisemitism and of imprisoning Dreyfus unlawfully. In the letter, Zola drew attention to the violations of law and the lack of evidence during the trial. The letter appeared on the front page of the newspaper *L'Aurore*. It created a strong reaction both in France and abroad. The French court found Zola guilty of defamation and ordered his arrest. Zola had to flee to England to avoid imprisonment.

So, the Dreyfus case split French society into two parts. The people who considered Dreyfus a traitor were mainly nationalists who held antisemitic views. The people who believed that he was innocent were generally intellectuals, actors, poets, writers, painters, scholars and politicians who were free of such sentiments. The people who knew that Dreyfus was innocent but remained silent acted out of fear of losing their status, positions or political influence. In 1899, Dreyfus received an additional ten-year prison sentence based on new accusations. In 1906, he received full exoneration. He was released from prison and returned to the army. He fought in the First World War and later retired with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

The Dreyfus case occurred during a period in which France suffered military failures against Germany. Nationalism and antisemitism reached their highest point. During the trial, the French press published materials and illustrations that expressed hatred toward Jews. These inflamed the antisemitic sentiments of the public.[\[3\]](#) In such an atmosphere, it was not easy even for influential figures to defend Dreyfus openly or

to accuse the French courts of unjust decisions. After Picquart identified the real traitor, a group of intellectuals began to demand a new examination of the Dreyfus case. Following Lazare and Zola, the politician Georges Clemenceau published an article in *L'Aurore* of which he was the owner and the editor-in-chief. In that article, Clemenceau tried to clarify which circles protected Major Esterhazy. The nationalists responded by publishing texts that targeted Clemenceau and the intellectuals who defended Dreyfus. The Dreyfus case not only divided French society but also divided the French intellectual community. Intellectuals with right wing views accused the intellectuals who defended Dreyfus of betraying national interests. Because of the efforts of the free press, the Dreyfus case crossed French borders. It led to anti French demonstrations in many European countries. Esterhazy could not withstand the pressure from French intellectuals. Although the French government supported him, he understood that he would not be able to avoid arrest. He fled to England. In England he gave two interviews to Rachel Beer, the editor-in-chief of *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times*, where he confessed his guilt. He did not receive any punishment for his actions. He lived in England until his death.

The Dreyfus case influenced every social group in France. It shook the political life of the country. It changed the lives of many politicians and intellectuals who opposed Dreyfus or supported him. Clemenceau, one of the leading defenders of Dreyfus, became the Prime Minister of France in 1906. Several republican politicians of France had to withdraw from political life. The Dreyfus case stands as an example of the struggle of a group of French intellectuals and the free press for justice, transparency and the rule of law at a time when nationalism peaked, antisemitism raged and court decisions were made under political pressure. The Dreyfus case is also an example of public debate and peaceful civic protest against the unjust policies of the ruling elite. The Dreyfus case

shows how politicians and propagandists fought. They were ready to use any falsification to appear righteous.

The Myasoyedov case or the act of treason in the Russian Empire

On 18 March 1915 a military field court convened in Warsaw. It found Lieutenant Colonel Sergey Myasoyedov of the Russian army guilty of treason and of espionage on behalf of an enemy state. It sentenced him to death. The sentence was carried out two hours later. The court announced its decision only after the execution.

Myasoyedov was born into one of the ancient noble families of Vilna, which is modern Vilnius. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Myasoyedov family had become impoverished although it still had strong ties to the Russian elite. Myasoyedov used these ties to resign from the Orenburg cavalry regiment in which he served. In 1892 he received an appointment as the head of the gendarmerie in the border town of Verzhbolovo (today's Virbalis in Lithuania). Myasoyedov sought wealth, luxury and a comfortable life. He used his position as a path to enrichment. He expanded his personal connections at the same time. As the head of a border crossing point, he personally knew emperors Nicholas II and Wilhelm II as well as other high-ranking officials who used the crossing. In accordance with his post, he also took an active role in preventing revolutionary materials from entering the empire and in preventing unofficial emigration and any possible actions against the authorities.

His pursuit of wealth attracted the attention of the Police Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, colloquially known as the Okhranka. The department began to inspect his activities. When the inspections produced no results, the leadership of the Police Department organized several provocations against him. When these provocations also failed, the department summoned Myasoyedov to testify as a witness in

a case that concerned a group of people accused of smuggling. The aim was to accuse Myasoyedov of negligence. The department wanted to prove that Myasoyedov had neglected border security because he was preoccupied with his private commercial affairs and that weapons and ammunition had therefore entered the empire illegally. During the trial Myasoyedov informed the court about the provocations carried out against him by the Police Department. The court acquitted him completely. The court informed the Minister of Internal Affairs about the provocations carried out by his subordinates. Because of this Myasoyedov incurred the wrath of the Minister of Internal Affairs Pyotr Stolypin. He had to resign under pressure from the leadership.

Myasoyedov returned to military service in 1910 after an accidental meeting with the Minister of War Vladimir Sukhomlinov. He did not abandon his private business because of his desire for profit. His involvement in private business while he held a public office did not escape the attention of Okhranka leadership. The Okhranka had personal conflict with him. Soon his name became linked for the first time with German counterintelligence. This happened through an acquaintance of one of the shareholders of his company. He was accused of espionage. Alexander Guchkov, the leader of the 17 October Union party, known as the *Octobrist Party* and later the *Liberal Republican Party*, used this accusation skillfully. Guchkov was a critic of both the government and the Minister of War Sukhomlinov. He accused Sukhomlinov of supporting an individual who faced espionage charges. In response to these accusations Myasoyedov wrote two letters to the Minister of War. In the first letter, Myasoyedov asked to resign. In the second letter, he demanded his own arrest and immediate investigation in order to put an end to the groundless espionage accusations.[\[4\]](#)

Sukhomlinov ordered both the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Internal Affairs to launch an investigation into the accusations against Myasoyedov. None of the investigations

found any evidence to support the accusations. On 16 May 1912, which corresponds to 29 May in the Gregorian calendar, the newspaper *Novoye Vremya* published information from the Ministry of War about the investigation.^[5] The statement said that Myasoyedov had not led counterintelligence within the Ministry of War. It said that the accusations brought against him had not been confirmed. Myasoyedov did not consider this decision sufficient. He went to court and accused Guchkov of defamation because Guchkov had published groundless accusations in the Russian press. Guchkov admitted his guilt. He stated that he was ready to publish a retraction in the newspaper. This indicated that he believed the accusations against Myasoyedov were in fact false. However, Guchkov had used the situation for his own interests. He used it to discredit the authorities. He had accused Myasoyedov of espionage many times in the press.

On the eve of the First World War, the Russian Empire witnessed the rise of not only antisemitism but also Germanophobia. After the war began, the authorities declared that the Germans were responsible for all problems and crises both at the front and inside the country. Public trust in the patriotism of the imperial palace, where the German empress resided, came under suspicion. Rumors spread among almost every layer of Russian society about the loyalty of the emperor's wife Alexandra Fyodorovna, whose name before conversion to Russian Orthodoxy was Alisa of Hesse Darmstadt and who was half German by origin. The first rumors about the treason of the emperor's cousin, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, who was appointed Commander in Chief of the Russian army, emerged one month after the beginning of the First World War. These rumors were not baseless. Germans held noticeable positions in the economy, in public administration and in the army of the Russian Empire. In his book *The Secret Ally: The Russian Revolution and Germany*, Gennady Sobolev wrote that the idea of German superiority had become such an attractive topic that everyone tried to shift the blame for

the country's misfortunes onto the country's high-ranking Germans and to use this excuse as a way for their own daily problems.[\[6\]](#) Politicians who sought power, high officials who wanted promotion and members of the elite who wanted new privileges tried to solve their personal problems through Germanophobia. For them supporting the treason accusation against Myasoyedov served as a convenient tool. This applied to Guchkov, who fought against the tsarist government, to Deputy Minister Alexei Polivanov, who wanted to become Minister of War, and to Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, who wanted to hide his military incompetence.

Myasoyedov was charged with treason for the first time in 1912 and was acquitted. Soon after the beginning of the First World War, he wrote a letter to the Minister of War again. He stated his desire to serve his homeland. He knew German perfectly. Because of this, he began working as a translator in Verzhbolovo, where he had served earlier, in October 1914. During his service, Myasoyedov performed his duties properly. He also infiltrated the rear of German forces as a scout and collected valuable information. At the same time, he plundered abandoned houses in areas from which German troops had retreated. Three months after he began his service, Yakov Kolakovsky, an officer of the Russian army, informed the Petrograd Police Department that Myasoyedov was a German spy. He added that the Germans planned to kill the Commander in Chief, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, and that they had set a reward of one million rubles for this purpose.

General Mikhail Bonch Bruevich was instructed to conduct the investigation related to Myasoyedov. He acted under the supervision of General Arseniy Gulevich, who was protected by the Grand Duke. Courts sometimes came under the influence of the tsar's family, but the Grand Duke feared that he would still not obtain the decision he wanted. Because of this, he insisted that the case be heard not in the Warsaw court but in a specially created military field court. The court found no evidence except the words of a single person, Kolakovsky.

Based on this testimony, the court arrested thirty people who were close to Myasoyedov or related to him. Most of the arrested people were sent into exile. Four people, including Myasoyedov himself, were executed.[\[7\]](#) The next year the Myasoyedov case was used as evidence against former Minister of War Sukhomlinov and he was arrested.

People from different layers of Russian society welcomed the arrest and execution of Myasoyedov.[\[8\]](#) The Russian press did not question the accusations against him. None of the Russian intellectuals demanded a fair and transparent trial. The historian Georgy Katkov writes that this was the first time that Russian public opinion managed to form a unanimous view. According to him, the presence of German influence in the upper layers of the authorities received official confirmation.[\[9\]](#) The historian William Fuller analyzes the attitudes of various social groups toward the execution of Myasoyedov in his study *The Enemy Within*. He writes that the behavior of some politicians, both liberals and conservatives, and the behavior of some generals in the Myasoyedov-Sukhomlinov case was so appalling that one could not help feeling horror. He writes that sacrificing the life of an innocent person for political aims was an act of baseness.[\[10\]](#) Walter Nicolai, who headed German military intelligence during the First World War, also notes he could not confirm any link between Myasoyedov and German intelligence.[\[11\]](#)

Conclusion

High treason is considered the most serious accusation for any citizen of any country. High treason means that a citizen targets the authorities that he is supposed to protect. It means that he threatens them. In the early Middle Ages, treason was synonymous with opposing authority. It was synonymous with showing disloyalty to it, rising in rebellion against it or fighting against it. Treason was also interpreted as opposing absolute authority or the sovereign. This interpretation continued until the English Revolution of

the seventeenth century and the French Revolution of the eighteenth century. These events established that not only the representative of the people but also rulers could be traitors. These revolutions declared that a ruler who ignored the interests of his people was a traitor. This situation created the possibility that not only the lower classes but also the upper classes could be traitors.

This article is an attempt to show against whom treason accusations could be raised in two states with different political systems, the French Republic and Tsarist Russia, and why such accusations became possible. It also aims to show how different social groups reacted to these accusations and what the results were. At the beginning of the twentieth century, France had a republican system of government although the courts were not completely free. The press was sufficiently free, and it allowed broad segments of the population to hear different views. The part of French society that sided with Dreyfus did not defend him. It demanded that the trial be open and transparent. A group of intellectuals and politicians understood well that an unjust trial and a non-transparent investigation would create a precedent. They understood that this precedent would allow the authorities to accuse any person of treason in the future and to isolate that person. The part of society that supported Dreyfus demanded that the truth come to light. The part that opposed Dreyfus had no interest in a fair trial or in the truth. This part believed that Dreyfus was guilty because the authorities said so. The military officers who knew that the accusations against Dreyfus were false acted as if they believed the accusations. They tried to hide their incompetence and their abuse of authority. The politicians who engaged in hypocrisy sought to protect their reputations. The nationalist intellectuals did not want to admit that they were wrong. The authorities demanded loyalty from a citizen whom they targeted because of his ethnic origin and to whom they denied the right to defend himself in court.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian Empire had an absolute monarchy although a parliament, the Duma, already functioned. It had political parties and an opposition press. The absolute authority of the tsar cast a shadow on the independence of the courts although Russian judges valued their professional reputation and took public opinion into account. This situation forced the emperor's close relative, Nikolai Nikolaevich to create a special military court in order to have Myasoyedov tried as a scapegoat. The Russian emperor and his family, who were supposed to serve their people, sacrificed innocent citizens for their own personal interests and hid their incompetent governance. They sent these citizens to the gallows on the basis of false accusations. Unlike the situation in France, no Russian intellectuals or politicians defended Myasoyedov. On the contrary, the Russian press published claims that Myasoyedov was a spy and a traitor. Both in the French Republic and in the Russian Empire those who believed the accusation of treason and those who did not had reasons that justified their positions. These reasons determined the ethical and moral values of those who believed in treason accusations and those who did not.

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