

# Hugo Valentin's scholarly campaign against antisemitism

1920s to the early 1950s

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VERTAISARVIOITU  
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD  
PEER-REVIEWED  
www.tsv.fi/tunnus

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.126119>

**ABSTRACT** • The Swedish Jewish historian Hugo Valentin (1888–1963) founded the field of Swedish Jewish history in the 1920s. Valentin was also a prominent and public figure in Swedish Jewish affairs, as a writer, Zionist and refugee activist. This article focuses on Valentin's analysis of antisemitism, from the 1920s to the early 1950s. It pays equal attention to the continuity and change of his writings on the topic, analysed in relation to such political contexts as the 'Jewish question', Zionism and anti-Nazi responses, and advances within scholarly research on antisemitism. It shows that Valentin staked out a new approach to the topic of antisemitism, in which Jewish characteristics and the so-called Jewish question, while not completely absent, were placed within parentheses. Instead, he presented antisemitism and individual antisemites as problems in their own right, which, given Nazi German expansionism and the outbreak of the Second World War, seemed to be a greater and more urgent issue than whatever questions might have pertained to Jews and their place in modern society.

HUGO VALENTIN was a Swedish Jewish historian born in 1888. Almost single-handedly, he created Swedish Jewish history as field of study for modern historical research, with the publication of his book on the topic in 1924. During the interwar period, Valentin became a towering figure within Swedish and Scandinavian Jewish affairs, a vocal proponent of the Zionist cause, a long-term member of the representative assembly of the Jewish congregation and a key figure within Swedish Jewish refugee relief work. During the Second World War he played a prominent role in informing the Swedish public about the ongoing genocide (Bortz 2021; Runblom 2009).

Valentin was also a man who thought and wrote a great deal about antisemitism throughout his career. Most notably, he

published a book on the topic in 1935. It was translated into a number of languages, including English in 1936 and German in 1937, and made him into one of the foremost experts on antisemitism of his time (Valentin 1936a; Jegebäck 2004). This article analyses Valentin's interpretation of antisemitism, based on his publications from the 1920s and the inter-war period, up to the 1950s and the post-war period. It aims to show both the continuities and change in Valentin's thinking on the topic of antisemitism. In terms of sources, this article does not aim to give an exhaustive account of everything that Valentin wrote on the topic. Instead, the article covers his writing in terms of three themes. The first of these themes consists of his most significant publications on antisemitism.



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The second theme is that of the 'Jewish question'. This concept is today mostly remembered (and on occasion used) in an antisemitic context. There is no doubt that antisemitism forms a significant part of the history of the Jewish question, as evidenced in publications by the German antisemitic writers Eugen Dühring and Theodor Fritsch, and most notably in the Nazi claim of arriving at its 'final solution' by embarking upon a programme of mass murder in the Holocaust (Dühring 1881; Fritsch 1901). But the Jewish question has a long history, which should not be reduced to its anti-Jewish extremes. Instead it is to be understood in historical terms as a political debate similar to the social, workers' or women's question. In this sense, it provided a framework, although by no means a neutral one, which could be referred to both in opposition to and in favour of the Jewish people (Bachner 2009; Alexander 2006: 459–502).

The third theme which has guided the selection of sources is that of Jewish history. It is as a historian of the Swedish Jews that Valentin made his claim to posterity in academic terms. Antisemitism was only a small part of his writings in this regard, but history is, I claim, nonetheless crucial for understanding Valentin's thinking on the topic, which was always informed by a historical perspective. Moreover, contemporary antisemitism affected his interpretation of Jewish history. Under the influence of anti-Jewish persecution during the 1930s and the Holocaust, Valentin presented an interpretation of Jewish history as a history of catastrophes (Valentin 1944).

As noted above, the Jewish question forms a political context which is of crucial importance for understanding Valentin's writings on antisemitism. Two other political contexts should be mentioned as well. First, that of Zionism, which increasingly informed

Valentin's thinking during the 1930s. Second, that of the anti-Nazi reaction forming during the 1930s and the Second World War. Together, the debate on the predicament of the Jewish people, Zionist ideology and the negative response to Nazism influenced Valentin's analysis of antisemitism in ways that the following analysis will make apparent.

Conflating all the various forms of hostilities, prejudices and forms of oppression that Jews have encountered throughout history as forming part of the same 'ism', the concept of antisemitism has the advantage of highlighting continuities and change over time. At the same time, it also has the drawback of presenting things that are more fittingly described as disparate as belonging to the same historical phenomenon. One way of countering this tendency is to look closer at how different people, both opposed to and in favour of Jews, have conceptualized and understood antisemitism (Judaken 2021; Feldman 2018).

There are a number of studies dealing with different scholarly and intellectual approaches to antisemitism, focusing for example on the theories of the Institute of Social Research, Jean-Paul Sartre and Sigmund Freud (Judaken 2006; Ziege 2009: 95–135; Bernstein 1996: 46–70; Bernstein 1998: 75–89). This research is generally concerned with illustrious intellectuals and how analyses of antisemitism fit within their larger thinking and philosophy, and less with how these analyses were part of a political and historical context. Within the field of antisemitism studies, different approaches to the topic, such as the psychological and sociological, are often presented from a historiographical perspective, but again, with little concern for the historical context of their genesis (Holz 2010: 316–28). This article analyses how scholarly theories on antisemitism have played a role in a specific historical and political setting.

## Antisemitism, the Jewish problem and Jewish radicalism in the 1920s

In 1920, Valentin wrote a review article of two books relating to Jewish matters with the title 'On the Jewish problem'.<sup>1</sup> When referring to Zionism and the project of regenerating Eastern European Jewry he wrote about

moral defects, acquired indirectly during the abnormal conditions of exile, that characterize the Eastern European Jewish masses and which are customarily referred to as typically Jewish (Valentin 1920: 350).<sup>2</sup>

The notion that Jews from Eastern Europe were suffering from specific 'moral defects' might (and should) sound shocking to the present-day reader but such prejudice was of course rampant at the time when Valentin was writing (Aschheim 1982). What is important here is that Valentin was writing within the Enlightenment tradition, arguing that the presumed effects of oppression that had left its mark on Jews would disappear once Jews became citizens with equal rights. According to this line of argument, it was not that anti-Jewish accusations were necessarily wrong but that the negative characteristics attributed to Jews by antisemites needed to be examined and contextualized. The notion that Jews had suffered oppression throughout history and that the marks of this oppression would disappear with the end of oppression

1 The two books were *Judarna*, eds. Marcus Ehrenpreis and Alfred Jensen (Stockholm 1920); and Stanisław Rożniecki's *Det jødiske problem: paa grundlag af iaagttagelser og studier over jødeliv i Polen* (Copenhagen 1920).

2 All translations, except those from the 1936 translation of Valentin's book-length study, are the author's.

had been part and parcel of the argument for Jewish emancipation since the eighteenth century (Dohm 1781; Gregoire 1788).

Valentin is primarily known for his pioneering work in Swedish Jewish history, first published in 1924. His early approach to the history of Sweden's Jews has been described as a Whig history, outlining a course of progress from immigration and discrimination to emancipation and integration in Sweden (Rudberg 2015: 16). Although antisemitism was not Valentin's primary topic, negative reactions against Jews were naturally part of the history of a country where Jews were not allowed to settle without converting to Christianity until the eighteenth century. Christian religious prejudice played a role and the back-and-forth between privileges accorded to Jews and the hostility of the Swedish bourgeoisie, who saw these privileges as infringements on rights and prerogatives that belonged to them, was a recurrent theme (Valentin 1924: 28, 232–3, 322–33). This form of anti-Jewish agitation was, Valentin seemed to argue, an almost inevitable reaction within a socio-economic situation where Jews appeared as foreigners with a different religion, interests and in many cases new business practices. It was, in this regard, at least in part a reaction against specific Jewish characteristics, which Valentin took care to present as the result of historical oppression that had left Jews with no other opportunity than usury for making a living (p. 11).<sup>3</sup> In Valentin's view, the emigration of poor Jews from Eastern Europe, starting in the seventeenth century, did much to bring their kin into disrepute. He referred to a 'steady stream of impoverished, begging and haggling Jews

3 Valentin referred to usury practised by certain Swedish Jews in the nineteenth century as a 'remnant of the dark ages' (1924: 386).



Hugo Valentin at the decennial celebration of the founding of the state of Israel in Stockholm, 1958.

from Eastern Europe [*östjudar*] who ‘united with the hounded Jewish proletariat living at the brink of famine’ (*ibid.*). The way they fought their desperate struggle for survival ‘came back to haunt not only themselves but the entire Polish-German Jewry’ (*ibid.*).

Valentin presented more contemporary anti-Jewish sentiments as part of the nineteenth-century nationalistic awakening and as a way to channel societal frustration in times of crisis. Since Jews were a weak minority they could fill the need of a scapegoat according to the ‘law of the least resistance’, a formulation to which Valentin would return on numerous occasions over the following years and decades (Valentin 1924: 276–7).

Within the framework of Valentin’s book on the history of Jews in Sweden, anti-semitism mainly served as the obstacle that Jews overcame in their path to becoming part of Swedish society. Eventually, with the advances of political liberalism and economic advances, the resistance of the Swedish

population withered away and more and more support gathered for the acceptance of Jews as members of Swedish society, a process which Valentin depicted as a triumph of tolerance and liberal ideology (Valentin 1924: 442).

When it came to combating antisemitism in his own time, Valentin was particularly concerned about the stereotype linking Jews to socialism and all forms of radical movements throughout history, which featured so prominently in antisemitism during the interwar period. Jews had been associated with political radicalism before 1917, but after the Russian revolution of that year, that link became even stronger (Hanebrink 2018; Blomqvist 2013). Eight years after the revolution, in 1925, Valentin published an article on ‘Judaism and radicalism’ in the Swedish conservative press. He explained to the readers that Jews for obvious reasons supported liberal movements, which promised them reforms and emancipation and welcomed them in their ranks, not conservative parties who did the opposite. Although pointing out that the vast majority of Russian Jews were not Bolsheviks, he argued that many of them had participated in the revolutionary movements because they had been victimized by the tsarist regime. Moreover, Valentin emphasized that Karl Marx himself ‘although born a Jew hated his tribe no less vehemently than the bourgeois class which he was part of’ and that a Jewish Bolshevik such as Leon Trotsky was ‘a real enemy of the Jews’ (Valentin 1925).

In making these arguments, Valentin argued that traits commonly attributed to Jews were in fact not specifically Jewish, that they had been produced by history and would be done away with through political liberalism and the lessening of the oppression that had produced them in the first place. This was a typical pro-Jewish approach to the Jewish question and a run-of-the-mill

apologetic response to antisemitism. At the time, this was thought to be an effective way of responding to antisemitic allegations, for example by the German Jewish organization the Zentralverein (Wiese 2020; Matthäus 2003). In hindsight, it is perhaps evident that while conceived as an argument favourable to Jews, it not only failed to take the sting out of antisemitism but also seemed to confirm that there was indeed something wrong with Jews. In this sense, talking about the Jewish question amounted to fighting a battle about Jewish reputation that Jews and their supporters could never win.

Valentin was convinced that the Jewish youth in Sweden and other countries without strong antisemitic sentiment needed to be activated and interested in their Jewish identity. In the first issue of the Swedish Jewish *Judisk Tidskrift*, a journal founded by prominent members of the Stockholm congregation such as Valentin and the chief rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis, published in January 1928, Valentin argued that the objective of Jewish politics should be 'positive goals' and not *Abwehr* or self-defence (Valentin 1928: 30–1). He sought to direct Jewish political efforts and community life to constructive activities. Based on an optimistic view of the future, Valentin staked out a direction of unapologetic self-assertion with Zionism as a unifying force that would reinvigorate the Jewish people. Valentin's criticism of *Abwehr*-literature would only become accentuated with time, partly in response to the efforts undertaken by the Zentralverein to counter antisemitism in Germany.

In this respect, Valentin's turn to writing about antisemitism must have been somewhat reluctant. He was not, of course, reluctant in the sense that he was hesitant in his opposition to all forms of hatred against Jews and anti-Jewish oppression but he would have preferred to direct his energy and

interest in Jewish matters to other things. Furthermore, a certain form of lassitude with regards to fighting antisemitism within the current political order was part and parcel of Zionist ideology. After all, this political movement started with the realization that the only effective way of helping Jews was to 'normalize' their existence by creating a Jewish nation. From that perspective, hatred, oppression and animosity towards Jews (as well as the equally problematic tolerance and indifference which threatened them by assimilation) was a chronic feature of Jewish life in the diaspora which could not be undone by education and public campaigning. According to this Zionist interpretation, antisemitism was a reaction to Jews and their difference and would not go away as long as there were Jewish minorities in the world (Laqueur 1972: 70–1, 91–2). Influencing non-Jews not to hate Jews was, from that perspective, a waste of time. As we know, and as Valentin quickly realized, his times were not favourable for the calm cultivation of Jewish identity. During the 1930s, the Zionist political project quickly became overshadowed by the imminent threat facing the Jews of Europe. In that situation, Hugo Valentin was forced into the position of self-defence that he sought to avoid.

### The antisemitic problem

In the introductory issue of *Judisk Tidskrift* mentioned above, published at a time when German National Socialism and its antisemitic brand of fascism garnered international attention, Valentin claimed that German antisemitism could be explained, at least in part, by German Jewish participation in radical movements (Valentin 1928: 28). During the following years, as National Socialism steadily gained ground among the German electorate, Valentin started to focus

more on the specificity of Nazi antisemitism and its fanatical nature in his comments on current international affairs published in *Judisk Tidskrift*. In December 1930, he commented that during the September elections of that year a third of all voters had cast their ballots for antisemitic parties, amounting to twelve million votes for what he called an 'antisemitism of pogroms'. He wrote of a 'wild psychosis of hatred' which in his view resembled scapegoating and 'anti-Jewish superstition' from the Middle Ages (Valentin 1930: 276–7). The fanatical hatred represented by Nazi antisemitism departed from the social, political and economic contexts which could explain other forms of hatred against Jews. During the 1930s, this time writing in the Zionist *Judisk Krønika*, the journal of the Scandinavian Jewish Youth Association, Valentin called Nazi anti-Jewish policies a 'war of extermination', and, although it was still far from the literal sense that it would acquire a few years later, Valentin wrote in terms of 'the total eradication of German Jewry' (Valentin 1936b: 103; Valentin 1936c: 155).

Two years after the Nazi accession to power, Valentin published his book-length study of antisemitism (Valentin 1935).<sup>4</sup> It was a comprehensive history and analysis of the topic, from antiquity to contemporary times, with a particular focus on its modern German variant, including a vast array of different theories and perspectives. Apart from Orthodox Jewish, Zionist, Socialist and Liberal readings of antisemitism, Valentin mentioned the perspectives of Heinrich Coudenhove-Kalergi, who, in the early 1900s, insisted on the importance of prejudices inculcated in Christian children, and the

research of Fritz Peretz Bernstein and Arnold Zweig on antisemitism as a matter of group psychology, published in the 1920s (Valentin 1936a: 10–17; Coudenhove-Kalergi 1901; Bernstein 1926; Zweig 1927).

In his historical exposé of antisemitism, Valentin distinguished modern from ancient and medieval antisemitism while using the Nazi antisemitism of his day to draw parallels between the past and the present. Thus, in Valentin's view, ancient Egypt was akin to modern-day Germany in their shared emphasis on Jew hatred, with the antisemitic Apion being the 'Theodor Fritsch of that time' (Valentin 1936a: 22). In the same vein, he described the myth that Jews were responsible for the Black Death during the Middle Ages as similar to the belief that Jews had instigated First World War and caused the German defeat in that war (p. 35). In addition, Valentin compared the hate with which Frenchmen greeted the Alfred Dreyfus, the officer accused of high treason on fabricated evidence in the late 1890s, to how Jews were being treated in Nazi Germany in the 1930s (p. 72).

Valentin was writing to counter not only antisemitism but also the belief in its omnipresence. The very fact of pervasive antisemitism seemed to form an anti-Jewish accusation in and of itself, pointing a finger at Jews and their supposed peculiarities which somehow managed to arouse so much resentment. It is from that perspective that Valentin's insistence that antisemitism was 'merely a special case of the hatred of foreigners' (Valentin 1936a: 19) should be understood. He explained (perhaps with a nod to his Zionist convictions) that when Jews were living in their own land, before the diaspora, they were 'no more exposed to hatred than other peoples' (p. 20). In his view, it was only after the Crusades that antisemitism took on the exaggerated form that it maintained

4 Henceforth, the English language edition, published in 1936, is referred to.

into the modern era. This was Valentin's way of reacting against the notion of an eternal antisemitism, the idea that Jews had always been and would always be reviled.

At the same time, Valentin remained with one foot in the debate on the Jewish question that he had first entered in the early 1920s. In the preface, he explained to the reader that it was not 'a book on the Jewish question'. Yet he did not deny 'the existence – in certain countries – of a Jewish question, which is a consequence of unfortunate circumstances and tragic mistakes' (Valentin 1936a: 5–6). Concerning Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe and its effects on modern antisemitism, Valentin rehashed the same formulation he had written in 1924, this time adding that 'Europe had acquired its "Eastern Jew question", which to this day plays such an important part in the history of Antisemitism' (p. 41). Despite the disclaimer concerning the Jewish question, a large part of his book reads as a catalogue of antisemitic allegations, with chapters bearing titles such as 'The Jews' financial power', 'The Jews and radicalism' and 'The Jews and Bolshevism' (Kvist Geverts 2020: 191–2). It is indicative of the gist of the contemporary debate on the topic that it was these three chapters that were published and distributed by the American Jewish Committee (Valentin 1936d, 1936e, 1936f). There was a continuity between Valentin's approach to antisemitism in 1935 and his earlier interpretations of the topic. He still considered that there was a Jewish question to be accounted for, and he was still as much opposed to what he called 'destructive Jewish radicalism' (Valentin 1936a: 241–2, 244). In this sense, Valentin was still moving within the logic of the Jewish question, examining and refuting antisemitic claims. It is perhaps in this way that we should understand his rather understated conclusion to his chapter on antisemitism in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*,

the claim that Hitler simply did not know anything about Jews (p. 194).

While acknowledging the continuity of Valentin's thinking on antisemitism from the 1920s to the 1930s, it is important to underscore what was new in his 1935 book. Here, he introduced a distinction between the Jewish question and the topic of antisemitism, two phenomena that were at the time often seen as intimately linked to each other, with the former explaining the latter. At this point there were still surprisingly few studies dealing with antisemitism as a topic in its own right, as a problem needing to be explained and which had to do with antisemites rather than Jews (Judaken 2021: 28). Publishing such a study was in itself a crucial contribution to moving away from explaining antisemitism by writing about Jews. In fact, antisemitism, as Valentin explained, had little to do with objective and verifiable facts and everything to do with emotions:

It is not the case that one group after objective inquiry arrives at the result that a certain group is harmful or inferior. The primary thing is hatred. The argument furnished by reasoning is secondary. (Valentin 1936a: 17)

That Valentin should have made reference to the Jewish question was perhaps inevitable – that was simply the discourse of his times – but he was clearly moving in a different direction. This direction signalled the difference between explaining to his readers that antisemitic allegations had a kernel of truth in them and claiming that they had irrational beliefs at their core. As he put it in his conclusions: 'it is not the Jews who are hated, but an imaginary image of them, which is confounded with the reality, and the Jews' actual "faults" play a very unimportant part in the matter' (Valentin 1936a: 10).

Valentin did not claim that all Jews were exemplary individuals but he paved the way for a new understanding of antisemitism by sidestepping the (Jewish) question, separating the interpretation of negative beliefs attributed to and violence directed against Jews from their actual characteristics.

Valentin did not write from an openly Zionist perspective in his 1935 book. Although not hiding his critical opinions behind a cloak of objectivity and impartiality (he referred to 'objective facts and subjective points of view') (Valentin 1936a: 6), he did not take an explicit Zionist stand. His approach was that of the critical scholar, an *intellectuel engagé*, who was participating in the political debate. He did, however, express his Zionist politics in a more implicit way. After reading his book, Valentin's readers could be in little doubt that he shared Theodor Herzl's view, which he quoted, that antisemitism was 'largely independent of [Jewish] behaviour' (p. 10). Valentin claimed that 'the events of 1933 in Germany have lent special significance' (p. 11) to Herzl's way of rejecting the promise of liberalism, that assimilation would lead to the demise of antisemitism, by remarking that even Jews who want to assimilate have not been allowed to do so. In addition, Valentin claimed in the concluding chapter that 'Antisemitism must be regarded as inseparable from the existence of Jews in dispersion' (p. 301). In that sense, Valentin seemed to argue that the only real remedy to antisemitism was the end of Jewish political weakness. Yet the principal idea of his 1935 book was not the promise of Zionism, but the threat of Nazism.

### **Nazi antisemitism as a threat to civilization**

In a sense, Valentin's way out of the Jewish question did not come through an attack on antisemitism in general but as a reaction

against Nazi antisemitism specifically. He tapped into the broad liberal and humanist anti-Nazi front that formed during the 1930s. In 1935, Valentin emphasized the fanatical insistence of Nazi antisemitism on the Jewish race as the locus of all evil; it represented a religious kind of belief in a new devil (Valentin 1936a: 206). He described the Nazi party as beholden to 'embittered racial hatred' (p. 114). Commenting on anti-Jewish violence following the Nazi accession to power, he described how the 'bloodhounds of racial animosity were let loose against defenseless German Jewry' and that the perpetrators 'drank deeply from the cup of sadism' (p. 120).

While emphasizing the violent nature of Nazi antisemitism, he also remarked that 'hatred of Jews, like all national hatred, threatens our civilization' (Valentin 1936a: 6). This was an argument that Valentin accentuated over the following years. While commenting on the situation for the Jews in Germany and later Nazi-dominated Europe in the 1930s and during the Second World War, Valentin expressed a reading of Nazi antisemitism which focused less on its specific threat towards Jews and more on the general danger for humanity. In the introduction to his book on antisemitism, he commented that antisemitism 'is no longer a problem which concerns only the Jews and their enemies. It concerns everyone' (p. 5). This interpretation corresponded to prevalent interpretations of Nazism which Valentin had in common with prominent Swedish Jews, such as Marcus Ehrenpreis, the chief rabbi of Stockholm, who described the persecution (or 'war of annihilation') of the Jews of Germany as a 'war against civilized humanity, a war against the spiritual and moral forces of life, with which it stands and falls' (Ehrenpreis 1939: 39). But Valentin was particularly keen on this notion to which he returned in



several books and articles. Writing in *Judisk Krønika* in September 1939, he claimed that Nazi anti-Jewish hostility had turned into an 'ideological antagonism' to 'the respect of human dignity, love for thy neighbour, and reverence for truth and righteousness', to which Jews had contributed so much (Valentin 1939b: 106–7). In the preface to a book about antisemitism, written in March 1939, Valentin explained that 'hatred against Jews constitutes a threat not merely against Jews, and indirectly against free government, but against the very principles on which human coexistence has been based since centuries, in other words against Christian civilization' (Valentin 1939a: 7). Referring to the November pogrom of the preceding year, Valentin referred to modern antisemitism as a 'form of nationalism that knows of no other moral than the one that reigns between packs of hunting beasts of prey' (Valentin 1939a: 7).

The idea that Jews belonged to civilization in the confrontation with a Nazi Germany representing barbarism was not of Valentin's making. It was commonplace in the 1930s. One notable example was the volume *Nazism: An Assault on Civilization* published in 1934 (Van Paassen and Waterman Wise 1934). Five years later, Valentin quoted the writer of the preface to that book, the American (Democratic) senator Robert F. Wagner, to the effect that Jews 'are today at the frontline where civilization meets barbarism' (Valentin 1939: 8). In an article published in the *New York Times*, in the aftermath of the November pogrom of 1938, Wagner had explained that Nazism was 'directed not only against the Jewish people, but against every manifestation of the democratic ideal' (Wagner 1938). This 'not only Jews' trope constituted a way of highlighting the general threat posed by Nazi Germany while also running the risk of downplaying the specific danger for Jews, as if these were on par.

To be sure, Valentin did not tap into this rhetoric in order to minimize the persecution and later genocide, which he did his best to publicize. In his case, it had two specific reasons. First, as a liberal he used this argument to express his vehement opposition to Nazism without adhering to anti-fascist politics. Secondly, it provided him with a way to escape the focus on Jews that had been the mainstay of the Jewish question. As he wrote in the autumn of 1944 in a book chapter about the Holocaust, which he called the 'greatest pogrom in world history':

At the same time, it had become apparent that organized hatred of Jews, alongside antisemitic propaganda, while admittedly targeting only Jews directly, indirectly aimed against the legal order, democracy and freedom in every country, and that antisemitism, when taken full circle, threatened the very life principle of Western culture and human co-existence. (Valentin 1944: 171)

It was as if antisemitism, which at the time was causing the death of tens of thousands of Jews per day, was not only, or even primarily, a threat against Jews. As Valentin explained, 'what happens to Jews today, might happen a different people [*folk*] tomorrow' (Valentin 1944: 169). When compared to latter-day insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust, this kind of rhetoric points rather strikingly in the opposite direction. Of course, Valentin did not mean to argue that the fate of Jews during the Second World War was in any way unexceptional; quite the contrary. He saw the Holocaust as the gruesome culmination of a history of calamities that was specifically Jewish. Nonetheless, as an opponent of antisemitism, that specificity was simply of no use to him, as it risked presenting Jews as isolated from the rest of

humanity. In this way, Jewish victims of Nazi persecution were on the side of civilized humanity rather than the outcast of the nations. This was a way of joining forces with other opponents of Nazism across the world, but it was also, and in a perhaps subtler sense, a way of transferring the debate surrounding antisemitism to problems that had little or nothing to do with Jews.

One example of an approach to antisemitism that was almost diametrically opposed to that of Valentin appeared in a book written by Efraim Briem, the professor of theology at Lund University, and published in 1940. Henrik Bachner has concluded that Briem rejected antisemitism while at the same time reproducing an extensive list of anti-Jewish stereotypes and, crucially, arguing that Jews were to blame for anti-Jewish hatred (Bachner 2009: 190–9; Briem 1940). As Briem claimed, Jews were ‘the people chosen for universal hatred’ (p. 11) In his view, this had mainly to do with Jewish particularism, the persistence of Jewish religion and Jewish identity. These arguments, that Jews were universally and constantly reviled and that this had to do with themselves, were exactly what Valentin tried to counter in his writings on antisemitism. In addition, Briem appears to have written his book at least in part as a rejoinder to Valentin. It is therefore not surprising that the latter responded with vehement criticism. As Valentin put it in a review published in *Judisk Krönika*, Briem claimed that ‘Jews themselves trigger anti-Jewish persecution by ruthlessly furthering their interest at the expense of the non-Jews that they despise and torment’ (Valentin 1940: 82). In Valentin’s view, Briem’s depiction of the Jewish people was ‘distorted’ and ‘marked by antisemitic delusions’ (Valentin 1940: 82). If that was how Valentin perceived more classical contributions to the Jewish question, such as Briem’s book, it is not surprising that

he preferred discussing the universal nature of group hatred and the threat of Nazism against all humanity.

### Antisemitism after the war and the triumph of Zionism

After a hiatus following the end of the Second World War, Valentin returned to the question of antisemitism during the concluding years of the 1940s. In 1947, he published two articles on the topic in the Swedish press. He reiterated his claim that by using antisemitism to attack other nations, Nazism had made it into a world problem. Valentin claimed that despite the widespread belief that the fall of Nazism and the murder of six million Jews would lead to less hatred against Jews, antisemitism was stronger in Europe and the USA than it had been before the war. Valentin did not venture to explain why this was the case, but noted the recent advances in research on antisemitism within the American social sciences by scholars and philosophers such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Jean-Paul Sartre, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson and Gordon Allport. Their studies, Valentin explained, demonstrated that antisemitism had everything to do with antisemites, and little to do with Jews (Valentin 1947a). Given that, as Valentin had argued in the 1930s and iterated in his second article published 1947, ‘the primary thing is hatred’, there was little that Jews could do to try to make antisemites change their minds. Writing at the time of the Swedish debate on whether or not to introduce legislation banning racial incitement in response to the activities of the antisemitic propagandist Einar Åberg, Valentin argued that this would not be enough to stem antisemitism (Valentin 1947b; Valentin 1948). A few months before the outbreak of the Palestine War, during which the state of Israel was

founded, Valentin claimed that antisemitism would persist 'unless the Jewish question is solved and Jews cease to be a people of scapegoats' (Valentin 1947b). It was, he argued, that realization that had brought millions of 'assimilated formerly antizionist Jews' to embrace the Zionist cause (*ibid.*). Thus, the Jewish question resurfaced after the Second World War within Valentin's writings on antisemitism. This time it was not in the form of a discourse that put the spotlight on Jews and their supposed failings in order to understand anti-Jewish resentment, but as the promise of the end of antisemitism.

Two years later, in 1949, Valentin developed his thoughts on antisemitism in a series of articles published in *Judisk Tidsskrift* (Valentin 1949a, 1949b, 1949c). The following year, these articles were published as a short book by the Scandinavian Jewish Association. In the preface, Valentin noted that contemporary antisemitism, although on the rise, was of a different kind from the 'murderous and sadistic' Nazi Jew hatred (Valentin 1950: 6). As he put it, it had more to do with social, professional and academic discrimination in the USA, and, in the Soviet Union, exclusion from political life.<sup>5</sup>

Returning to the understanding that antisemitism was a scourge of civilization, which Hitler, according to Valentin, had demonstrated in practice, Valentin concluded that 'antisemitism – not the Jews – appears in these days as a societal problem of the greatest import' (Valentin 1950: 7, 46–7). There was a contradiction between this understanding of antisemitism as a reaction against civilization, as represented by Nazi Germany, and the antisemitism that was

part of the Christian tradition. After the war, Valentin focused more of his attention on the latter form of antisemitism, the one that was transmitted to children and which persisted, often unconsciously, into adulthood, which he had mentioned already in 1935 (pp. 54–6). This time, he added psychoanalytical perspectives on scapegoating and American research on prejudice, such as that carried out by the Institute for Social Research and the American psychologist Gordon Allport, to bolster his case that antisemites, not Jews, were the actual problem (pp. 12–19, 27–8). With reference to that current of research, he claimed that 'science has finally managed to pierce the façade of antisemitism and discover the sources of the dark streams of Jew hatred' (p. 7). Despite Valentin's enthusiasm, it should be noted that the research he was referring to dealt more with prejudice in general than with antisemitism specifically. Of course, this only added to his case that antisemitism was but one form of a general phenomenon.

Although Valentin, as noted in the introduction, played a central role in informing the Swedish public about the Holocaust during the Second World War, this event was almost completely absent from his post-war writings on the topic of antisemitism. This is a rather striking contrast to how much the two would later become linked in both scholarly and popular discourses. It is important to note that Valentin, who did not cease writing about the Holocaust after the war, was acting in a time when the genocide of European Jewry had not yet turned into the symbol it would later become. Theories on antisemitism prior to the war had not prepared him (or anyone else) for the mass murder that was yet to come. After the war such theories did not need to refer to the Holocaust.

Concerning the idea that Jews could do nothing as individuals to counter antisemitism, it is interesting that Valentin drew

5 With regard to Soviet antisemitism, Valentin may have been influenced by the writings of the Bundist Paul Olberg. See Enerud 2017.

a rather different conclusion from the Jewish victory in the Palestine War. In 1950, after yet again criticizing the German Jewish *Abwehr* strategy as a misguided attempt to counter antisemitism which ended up publicizing antisemitic views, Valentin had this to say:

It should only be pointed out that probably nothing in our time has to the same extent influenced world opinion in an anti-antisemitic direction as Israel's victory over the vastly superior armies supported by England. It then dawned on the wider public that the horrible image of Jews, used by the Nazis to trick humanity into taking it for reality, was false. (Valentin 1950: 53)

Although individual Jews, according to Valentin, were unable to fight antisemitism by behaving differently, it seemed as if Jews collectively could do so by showing their mettle as soldiers on the battlefield.

## Conclusions

The Swedish Jewish historian Hugo Valentin was a reluctant campaigner against antisemitism in two different senses. First, he was a prominent proponent of the Zionist cause and saw the limitations of arguing against antisemitism. Secondly, in his view, dealing with antisemitism was a task for non-Jews, not Jews. Nonetheless, he waged an important scholarly campaign against antisemitism and became one of the most important experts on the topic in the 1930s. His first writings on the topic, from the 1920s, were situated squarely within the so-called Jewish question. Under the impact of Nazi antisemitism during the 1930s, he more and more emphasized the irrational nature of anti-Jewish hatred. After the Second World War, he became impressed with advances made in the study of antisemitism and prejudice within the

American social sciences, conveying their findings to the Swedish and Scandinavian Jewish public. These American studies reinforced the notion that antisemitism had little to do with Jews and everything to do with antisemites.

Valentin reacted in a number of different ways to antisemitism from the 1920s to the years following the Second World War. His main contribution to the debate was to further establish antisemitism as a topic separate from questions relating to Jews and their actual characteristics. He accomplished this by insisting on the social and psychological functions played by antisemitism, but also by underscoring the general threat against democracy and civilization posed by antisemitism, especially in its Nazi form. At the same time, he did not completely abandon the perspectives on the Jewish questions that he had first expressed in the 1920s. As a Zionist, he remained sceptical of the idea that one could argue with antisemites or counter their arguments in rational debate. His Zionist politics also meant that he was committed to finding a practical way out of the Jewish predicament. At least initially, he was optimistic with regards to the effects of the image of Jews created by the founding of the state of Israel. ■

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