

A People Apart: the Jews in Europe, 1789-1939

Review Number:

142

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 October, 2000

Author:

David Vital

Date of Publication:

1998

Pages:

907pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Albert S. Lindemann

Any reviewer must experience an initial sense of admiration if not awe in picking up this 900-page magnum opus. The publisher's blurb on the flyleaf informs us that "This powerful and stimulating new analysis represents a watershed in our understanding of the history of the Jews in Europe." Leafing through it, one quickly sees that it is based on a prodigious familiarity with primary sources in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, French, Russian, as well as English. A closer reading gradually reveals a treasure trove of fascinating and unfamiliar details about the history of the Jews in most countries of Europe from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of WW II. Certainly, few would seem to know the modern history of the Jews in Europe as comprehensively or as intimately as David Vital, now an emeritus professor, at the pinnacle of a distinguished career, both as a scholar and earlier as an Israeli government official.

No review, even one twice as long as this, could hope to convey adequately the complexity, range of issues covered, and subtlety of this volume -- or, indeed, the nature of its problems. The author's interpretative stance presents an especially imposing challenge to present fairly, for this is a decidedly idiosyncratic work, in a number of regards bafflingly so. A scholar of Vital's accomplishments is certainly entitled to some self-indulgence in writing about what he considers most important, and in many regards he does so impressively, but parts of this volume verge on the capricious in terms of what is covered and what is not; other parts are all-too transparently tendentious. It is obviously the case that any work this ambitious will almost inevitably suffer from imbalances or lacunae; it will likely stumble into inconsistencies, overstatements and errors of one sort or another. But some of the problems in this volume go beyond what can be easily nationalised, and they tend to undermine the book's arguments. Given Vital's erudition, his impressive intellectual gifts, one expects more. There is throughout a sense of complex narratives that fail to connect satisfyingly, arguments that are not effectively pulled together. And whether this work can be accurately termed a new analysis is highly questionable; it might be more fittingly described as an elaboration on old and familiar themes. As far as its being a watershed in our understanding -- well, publishers will be publishers.

A more friendly reading might simply conclude that Vital remains so anchored in his primary sources and

provides such an abundant sense of the complexity, the messiness of the historical record, that no effort to make the greyness of theory prevail over the greenness of reality could turn out to be all that neat or consistent. But the grey, giving expression to Vital's resolute Zionist convictions, is unmistakably there: Scholars familiar with recent histories of Germany and Russia may at times rub their eyes in disbelief at Vital's interpretations. His description of a decadent German-Jewish mentality, to cite one of the more striking examples, echoes hard-line Zionism of a very old vintage, and his presentation of the much criticised "rising tide" theory of German anti-Semitism, culminating in Nazism, is disappointingly thin. It is both surprising and troubling that Vital does not even mention the points made by the many critics of these Zionist theories, let alone try to refute them.

Vital's openly announced concern with politics is by its nature old history, and thus one should not expect to find much here about such recent concerns as gender, culture, or class. Not surprisingly, as a Zionist Vital is impressed with the power of Jew-hatred, and again no particular surprise, he scrutinises the Gentile rulers of the Jews with a jaundiced if certainly expert eye. Paradoxically, in a book with the title *A People Apart*, it sometimes seems that Vital is more interested in those rulers than in the Jews themselves; or if that overstates the matter, one is nonetheless tempted to remark that his eye seems almost equally jaundiced in looking at Jewish leaders, while the Jewish people, the more anonymous masses, remain, well, pretty anonymous: Again, this is an older variety of history, one concerned primarily with leaders, their ideas, institutions, and activities, and not with the masses.

Vital emphasises from the beginning that he has by no means attempted to write a comprehensive account of the history of the Jews in modern Europe. "This is a political history." Those five words stand starkly alone as the opening paragraph of the Preface and are consonant with the Zionist Revisionists' single-minded emphasis on the centrality of political activity. The ensuing paragraphs explain that the book is largely unconcerned with many of the themes familiar to readers of Jewish history. Famous Jewish artists, inventors, scientists, novelists, or philosophers are mostly missing and are included only insofar as their activities had palpable political implications. At the same time, the book is no mere compendium of political events; even the political focus is dominated by strict principles of selectivity: "The function . . . of anecdotal detail had to be limited to the support and elucidation of argument. Description had never to be more than the handmaiden of analysis." (viii) Vital offers the further warning that these pages, because focused on the political, will be sombre in tone -- concerned, "like it or not . . . [with] what is harshest, ugliest, and most dangerous in human conduct." [vii]

In a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, further discussed below, Vital described his overall goals more succinctly and provocatively than in the book itself: He has tried, he wrote, to explore how much "the Jewish people [were]. . . not mere incidental objects of the . . . history of other nations but were possessed . . . of a history that was . . . genuinely their own. Were they . . . participants . . . in the making of their own political history . . .?" However, direct, cogent answers to these questions are not so easy to discern in this volume. That is unfortunate, for they obviously suggest some qualification of the key notion of Jewish powerlessness, some sense in which Jews were responsible for their own fate. And therein lies a minefield: For many observers, mention of Jewish responsibility suggests a forbidden direction -- "blaming the victim." Vital's exact position on the matter tends to get lost in a thicket of inconclusive remarks. Some of them seem to suggest his agreement with those who reject the notion of Jewish responsibility: He informs us, for example, that dealing with the political, with the power of one group over another, means confronting an arena "touched with pathology." If modern anti-Semitism is essentially pathological -- a widely held view -- then Jews have no significant responsibility for it. If Gentile hostility to Jews, on the other hand, had something to do with the way Jews really were, if it was normal in the sense that different groups normally compete, have different interests, and experience friction producing hostility, then Jews might be said to have some degree of responsibility for the hatred they have faced.

These contrasting notions beg to be amply and clearly analysed -- above all in a book that claims to be primarily analytical -- but, to repeat, Vital tends to leave them dangling. Reading between the lines of his scattered remarks on the matter over hundreds of pages, one might certainly conclude that he sees *both* pathological hatred and normal hatred, but he neglects or postpones addressing explicitly their relationship

and relative strength. On p. 760, come the following remarks: "It needs to be said at this point [!], that it has not been part of the purpose of this book to *account* for the rise and gathering of forces hostile to Jewry either before the First World War or in the years subsequent to it." And then on p. 774, even more explicitly on p. 802, Vital seems to recognise that, of course, there were differences between a hatred based to an important degree on "objective" factors (as was, he notes, the case in interwar Poland), compared to that based on "doctrine" (pathology) as in Germany, where he asserts that there was no objective basis at all for hostility to Jews. But he then appears, frustratingly, to be more comfortable with recounting what various witnesses had to say, then moves on to other matters.

Vital's lack of a systematic consideration of the nature of anti-Semitism is one of the more puzzling aspects of this volume. He describes what various historical figures wrote about it. Here and there, in presenting what ostensibly reflects his own conclusions, he alludes to the roles of religion, cultural friction, class tension, economic envy, or a plain, crude desire to take over Jewish goods. He notes that Theodor Herzl "made no serious attempt to examine the twin questions . . . : *Why* did the Jews constitute a source of perpetual tension and conflict? *What*, when all was said and done, were the true roots of anti-Semitism and its explanation?" He then adds, "but that hardly mattered." [443] Whether it hardly mattered in Herzl's case might be contested, but a lack of a comparable serious attempt in a book like this does matter.

Herzl himself came close to the position of blaming the victim; at least insofar as he considered the defects of Jews in Europe to be the most fundamental reason that they were hated by non-Jews. Herzl is not an easy man to pin down, but a number of scholars have arrived at the paradoxical conclusion that this founder of modern Zionism might be considered a "self-hating Jew." His admiration of the Gentile world -- his fondest dream was to be reborn as a Prussian Junker -- was remarkable, whereas his comments in his diary about many of the Jews he met and worked with were often caustic, even cruel and ugly. No less remarkable was Herzl's apparent lack of hatred for Gentiles, even the anti-Semites among them. The Jewish state he hoped to create was to be liberal-democratic, having few if any connections with Jewish tradition (about which, at any rate, he was not particularly well informed). Again, in a book so massively detailed and one in which Herzl might be described as the hero, Vital devotes curiously little attention to these glaring paradoxes and mostly ignores the recent secondary works that have brought them up.

That Vital provides a mere two-page Preface and no Conclusion whatsoever (only another two-page Epilogue) is suggestive of larger organisational and analytical deficiencies. What he terms the Introduction is closer to a six-section prologue, devoted mostly to historical narrative, with shorter scope analyses of various sorts -- without question often learned and fascinating -- but containing few analytical passages that explicitly address the entire scope of the book. The analytical perspectives implicit in the organisation of the following chapters are often expressed in an intriguingly terse fashion (typically they are given a single-word title: Proposals, Disjunctions, Movements, Crystallisation, Dénouement), but they tend to resemble the sentences and paragraphs, not, to be sure, in their length but rather in their tendency occasionally to leave the reader uncertain, if not baffled, as to what they finally mean, how they fit together. The table of contents provides descriptive titles to the sections within the chapters, potentially a most useful aid in following the book's complex narrative, but in the text itself those titles are left out, with Roman numerals taking their place. Can it be that Vital's readers are expected to have memorised them all, or to have understood that they must flip back and forth to the table of contents as they read? This may seem a pedantic point, but it suggests how challenging, indeed fatiguing, it can be at times to follow the general themes of this book.

A question naturally emerges: Who are this volume's intended readers? Surely not a broad reading public, for only those who are already quite knowledgeable about the history of the Jews in Europe will likely be able to avoid a recurring sense of losing the thread of the argument, if not being utterly lost. Vital writes in his Preface that he is offering an account of the "absolute essentials," inevitably leaving out much. So we have 900 pages of absolute essentials, with scant regard for readers ignorant of the background. Revealingly, when Paul Johnson reviewed *A People Apart* for the *Times Literary Supplement* Vital complained, in a letter to the editor a few weeks later (containing the description of the book above quoted), that Johnson, in spite of his generally favourable comments, seemed to have misunderstood the book, or at least had failed to present in the review what was essential to its purposes. [June 18, 1999, pp. 3-4; and July 2, 1999] The

complaint had some validity, but nonetheless a fair question emerges: If Johnson failed to grasp Vital's main points, just how many others might also experience some difficulty with them?

There are other aspects of this volume that may put off all but a highly motivated readership. Vital's complex, often serpentine sentences, his tendency to austere, precise understatement, are major challenges in themselves: As readers brave clause after clause, copious qualifiers, and frequent parenthetical remarks, they must get used to taking long breaths, as when reading German, in anticipation of the relevant verb or other key word. Paragraphs sometimes go on for pages. A few reviewers have praised Vital's writing style as stately and elegant. Others have dismissed it as turgid and nearly unreadable. These are, no doubt, matters of taste, but it seems fair to warn that Vital's sentences, no less than the organisation of his material and his interpretative purposes, are not suitable for those in search of light entertainment.

One would expect a work of this sort to provide ample historiographical discussions. But again Vital does so only sporadically and not very satisfyingly. It is unlikely that he is ignorant of recent controversies among historians about many of the topics he discusses, but for whatever reason he repeatedly ignores recent secondary literature, tending to cite older secondary sources, but more often basing his account almost entirely on primary sources. His related, more general tendency to skim quickly over or completely ignore various topics may to some extent reflect simple oversights; in some instances there seem to be little rhyme or reason to them. For example, he does not even mention Moses Hess, the Beilis Affair, or the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, all unquestionably important. A suspicious reader might speculate that the Beilis Affair does not fit comfortably into a Zionist narrative, since Beilis, charged with ritual murder, was found not guilty by a jury of very ordinary Russian subjects, and his release was hailed ecstatically in Russia and throughout the world, by both Jews and non-Jews. But such speculation would be based on flimsy grounds; anti-Semitism in Russia was hardly exposed as ephemeral because of the result of the Beilis Affair. But why then was this important affair ignored and others, less important (e.g., Xanten, Tiszaeszlar) included?

Kindred suspicions might arise in other contexts: Why would a book of this length and detail skip almost entirely over the period of Alexander II, while amply discussing the previous reign of Nicholas I and the following reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II? Is it because the reforming 1860s and 1870s seemed promising, because Jews were treated better and many prospered during it? Again, Vital does not offer any explanation for this curious hiatus. Why an almost total neglect of pre-war Hungary, with its large Jewish population? One might speculate, again not very persuasively, that it was because in the period prior to WW I, at least, Hungary seemed a success story for Jews and provided very little support for Zionist interpretations. In a way even more striking is the neglect of Italy. Its Jewish population was small compared to Hungary, to say nothing of Russia, but the extent to which Italian Jews prospered in almost every sense, with a Jewish prime minister (Luigi Luzzatti) in the same late nineteenth century period that anti-Semitic movements were appearing elsewhere, certainly would seem to deserve some comment. During the initial stages of fascist rule, Jews were even more prominent, serving in the leading ranks of the Fascist Party and in high government posts. Vital's remark that "Mussolini[']s . . . ideas on the matter of the Jews, while vague, were for a time not ungenerous" (893) is wholly inadequate to suggest Mussolini's long, complex and often intimate relationships with Italian Jews.

Vital devotes much attention to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, and appropriately so, since it was unquestionably an event of great importance in Jewish history. But his pages are devoted mostly to a description of the horrific events and the reaction to them, again without question in perceptive ways. But he devotes almost no attention to the long-range historical background to those events. A number of obvious questions go unasked, let alone unanswered. Would the Kishinev pogrom have occurred -- or indeed many of the riots in others cities in the south of Russia where pogroms were most important -- if the Jewish population had not grown so phenomenally, large numbers often moving in from other parts of Russia during the past decades?

These critical remarks are not meant to suggest that the above issues are simple; analyses of them are bound to be contested, final answers elusive. Entirely satisfactory explanations of the origins of urban rioting, let alone anti-Semitism, cannot be provided by reference to population growth, economic change, or class

conflict, but they do need to be taken into serious and systematic consideration, something Vital repeatedly falls short on. He does offer much statistical information about Jewish population growth and movement, but he only feebly addresses the natural question of how much that growth and movement had to do with rising hostility to Jews in the same period. He disdains as irrelevant to his story the familiar narratives of Jewish success in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but is it not conceivable that the Jewish rise -- in numbers, wealth, indeed in many arenas -- had something quite central to do with Gentile hostility to Jews?

Vital observes in his Preface that ". . . it has been difficult . . . to avoid writing this book in any other spirit than . . . 'savage indignation,' but the effort has been made." And no doubt it has, often impressively. But if he had marshalled a larger part of his 900 pages to confront, directly and seriously, objections to his worldview, rather than ignoring them or giving them such short shrift or obscuring their very existence with the weight of this tome, his efforts surely would have been even more impressive.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/142#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/764>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>