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# Rudolf Steiner and the Jewish Question

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## *Antisemitism*

writings.<sup>3</sup> An overview of Steiner's shifting perspective on Judaism and antisemitism may provide some insight into these enigmatic questions. What follows is a brief and necessarily schematic attempt to summarise Steiner's protean stance on the "Jewish question", that fateful topic commanding such intense interest among Steiner's contemporaries.

#### RUDOLF STEINER AND THE "JEWISH QUESTION"

The subject of anthroposophy's relationship to Jews and Judaism is a complex and contentious one, in part because of the widely disparate viewpoints represented among past and present anthroposophists. A number of Steiner's followers came from Jewish backgrounds; the early Zionist leader Hugo Bergmann, for example, was for a time a devoted student and admirer of Steiner. At the same time, both Steiner's immediate predecessors and colleagues, the theosophists, and several of his successors within the first generation of anthroposophists promoted a sharp contrast between "Aryans" and "Semites" that systematically privileged the former while systematically denigrating the latter.<sup>4</sup> Steiner's collected works, moreover, totalling more than 350 volumes, contain pervasive internal contradictions and inconsistencies on racial and national questions. Alternating between patently racist and anti-racist precepts, his overall racial theories are somewhat difficult to reconstruct, much less summarise adequately.

Steiner's published views on Jews were even more self-contradictory than his other statements on various ethnic and racial groups. These contradictions are partly explained by the fact that Steiner's position on the "Jewish question" shifted significantly over time. In the overall arc of Steiner's intellectual development, his attitude towards Jews moved from an unreflective embrace of antisemitic prejudices, to public denunciation of the excesses of organised antisemitism, to an elaborate racial theory of cosmic evolution in which antisemitic themes played

<sup>3</sup>Earlier partisan analyses have examined Steiner's racial and ethnic theories in detail; see Peter Bierl, *Wurzeln, Erzengel und Volksgeister: Die Anthroposophie Rudolf Steiners und die Waldorfpädagogik*, Hamburg 1999, and Georg Schmid, 'Die Anthroposophie und die Rassenlehre Rudolf Steiners zwischen Universalismus, Eurozentrik und Germanophilie', in Joachim Müller (ed.), *Anthroposophie und Christentum: Eine kritisch-konstruktive Auseinandersetzung*, Freiburg 1995. For a measured historical inquiry see Helmut Zander, 'Der Geist auf dem Weg durch die Rassengeschichte. Anthroposophische Rassentheorie', in Schnurbein and Ulbricht, pp. 292–341. For a concise summary of the terms under discussion see the entries on 'Rassentheorien', 'Theosophie', 'Anthroposophie' and 'Steiner, Rudolf' in Julia Iwersen, *Lexikon der Esoterik*, Düsseldorf 2001.

<sup>4</sup>This unfortunate tendency has continued to the present day among some segments of the anthroposophical movement; see, for example, Ludwig Thieben, *Das Rätsel des Judentums*, Basel 1991 (first published 1931); Ernst Uehli, *Atlantis und das Rätsel der Eiszeitkunst*, Stuttgart 1957 (first published 1936); idem, *Nordisch-Germanische Mythologie als Mysteriengeschichte*, Stuttgart 1965 (first published 1926); Guenther Wachsmuth, *Mysterien- und Geistesgeschichte der Menschheit*, Dresden 1938; Werner Georg Haverbeck, *Rudolf Steiner—Anwalt für Deutschland*, Munich 1989. For a sanitised portrait of contemporary anthroposophical perspectives on Judaism, see Fred Paddock and Mado Spiegler, *Judaism and Anthroposophy*, Great Barrington 2003.

a prominent part. To simplify matters a little, Steiner's changing stance can be divided into three stages: an early phase of cultural antisemitism during his pan-German nationalist period in the 1880s and early 1890s; a middle phase of individualist philosemitism around the turn of the century; and a later phase of esoteric antisemitism during his mature anthroposophist career from 1902 onwards.<sup>5</sup>

Even the most careful periodisation is likely to be controversial, however, in part because Steiner's racial doctrines remain underexamined and indeed largely unknown to outside scholars, while most anthroposophists flatly deny any racist or antisemitic elements within their founder's work.<sup>6</sup> There is undoubtedly a progressive, universalistic, and humanist side to Steiner's teachings, which many commentators take to be emblematic of his doctrine as a whole, even those who are otherwise alert to the pitfalls involved in similar occult philosophies. George Mosse's classic work *Toward the Final Solution*, for instance, implicitly absolves Steiner's anthroposophy of racism. In the midst of a discussion of theosophically oriented racist thought, Mosse singles out anthroposophy as a notable contrast to virulently racist variants of theosophy, such as Ariosophy.<sup>7</sup> This perspective misconstrues the distinctive nature of Steiner's racial teachings. Critical review of the textual evidence indicates that it is precisely the apparently progressive, humanist, and universalist elements in anthroposophy that lie at the heart of Steiner's deeply problematic stance towards Judaism and the Jewish people.

The contested meaning of the concept of "assimilation" in the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras is central to explicating Steiner's views on the Jewish question. What Steiner understood by the term was crucially different from what the vast majority of Jews, particularly pro-assimilationist Jews, meant by it. In this respect, his stance was consonant with that of many other non-Jewish German and Austrian

<sup>5</sup>Steiner's oscillation between philosemitic and antisemitic poles was not unique; a similar process can be observed in other authors from the era such as Walter Bloem or Oskar Panizza. On the ambiguous nature of German philosemitism see Michael Brenner, "'Gott schütze uns vor unseren Freunden'—Zur Ambivalenz des Philosemitismus im Kaiserreich", in *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung*, vol. 2 (1993), pp. 174–199.

<sup>6</sup>This ambivalence raises an interesting hermeneutic problem for scholarly analysts: which strands within Steiner's incongruous belief system are to be emphasised? Many of Steiner's defenders point to the fact that Steiner never considered himself an antisemite, and conclude that his doctrines were therefore free of antisemitic elements. Such reasoning is both psychologically and textually naive, and ignores the extensive record of subjective denial among historical figures infamous for their active hostility to Jews, from Wilhelm Marr to Heinrich von Treitschke to Karl Lueger to Adolf Eichmann. On this phenomenon see Berel Lang, 'Self-Description and the Anti-Semite', in *International Center for the Study of Antisemitism Annual Report*, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 21–24.

<sup>7</sup>Mosse writes: "Theosophy could, in fact, also support a new humanism. Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Society, founded in Berlin in 1913, linked spiritualism to freedom and universalism." George Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, New York 1978, p. 96. Micha Brumlik is a notable counterexample of a scholar who initially absolved Steiner and anthroposophy of racist and antisemitic tendencies and then revised his position upon reviewing the evidence; see the foreword to Brumlik, *Die Gnostiker*, 3rd edn., Berlin 2000, pp. 3–4.

intellectuals of the time.<sup>8</sup> While Steiner's own position was emphatically assimilationist, his belief was not so much in acculturation in the standard sociological sense, but in amalgamation, merger, and eventual elimination.<sup>9</sup> He did not seek to integrate Jews into existing European cultures, but to dissolve Jewish distinctiveness and Jewish identity as such by transcending them within an ostensibly universalist framework. In light of this universalist emphasis, the distinctions between assimilationist and dissimilationist antisemitism and between cultural and racial forms of antisemitism take on particular significance. Steiner combined cultural and racial elements within a broadly assimilationist perspective that included markedly antisemitic components. These elements arranged themselves in different combinations at different points in his life. In both his antisemitic and philosemitic periods, a constant throughout the otherwise contrary phases of Steiner's intellectual development was his hope "that Jewry as a people would simply cease to exist".<sup>10</sup>

### PAN-GERMAN ANTISEMITISM

Born into a Catholic family in provincial Austria-Hungary in 1861, Steiner began his public career in Vienna in the early 1880s as an active participant in the Austrian *deutschnational* or pan-German movement.<sup>11</sup> He wrote dozens of articles for the pan-German press in Austria between 1882 and 1891, and for a brief time in 1888 edited

<sup>8</sup>Although the term "assimilation" may be increasingly inadequate to the historiography of German-Jewish relations in general, a discerning focus on what Jonathan Hess aptly calls a "dated category" is necessary to distinguish the conflicting positions at stake (Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity*, New Haven 2002, p. 10). For a cogent defence of the continued applicability of a nuanced conception of assimilation to German Jewish history, see Michael Meyer, 'German Jewry's Path to Normality and Assimilation' in Rainer Liedtke and David Rechter (ed.), *Towards Normality? Acculturation and Modern German Jewry*, Tübingen 2003 (Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 68).

<sup>9</sup>On the contrasts between assimilation and amalgamation/elimination, see David Sorkin, 'Emancipation and Assimilation: Two Concepts and their Application to German-Jewish History', in *LBI Year Book*, vol. 35 (1990), pp. 17–33; as well as Donald Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany*, Baton Rouge 1980, pp. 95–127. In order to reflect the tensions inherent in the concept, and in recognition of conventional terminology, I will use "assimilationist" to refer to Steiner's tendentially eliminationist stance, predicated on the disappearance of "Jewry as such".

<sup>10</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *Die Geschichte der Menschheit und die Weltanschauungen der Kulturvölker*, Dornach 1968, p. 189. The passage is discussed at length below. While much of the material I examine comes from written texts published during Steiner's lifetime, I will also draw on posthumously published transcripts of his lectures; these transcripts are considered authentic by anthroposophists. Most of the lectures were transcribed by professional stenographers and were painstakingly edited by the executors of Steiner's literary estate, who publish the *Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe*, the official edition of Steiner's complete works, from anthroposophy's world headquarters in Dornach, Switzerland. When available, I will quote from authorised English translations of Steiner's books, including the lectures cycles; otherwise I will provide my own translations from the *Gesamtausgabe* editions.

<sup>11</sup>Although the term "pan-German" does not entirely capture the range of meanings covered by "deutschnational", it has been the standard English rendering for decades. Particularly in the 1880s, the Austrian wing of the movement did not necessarily seek territorial union with the German Empire, but rather focused on maintaining and strengthening the cultural and political hegemony of ethnic Germans within the Habsburg Empire. For background see Albert Fuchs, *Geistige Strömungen in Österreich 1867–1918*, Vienna 1949, pp. 172–186, and Pieter Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire 1848–1914*, Ann Arbor 1996, pp. 169–270.

the *Deutsche Wochenschrift*, an influential pan-German newspaper. Staking out his own racial-national roots, Steiner thus described himself in 1918 as a “true-born German-Austrian” and “German by descent and racial affiliation”.<sup>12</sup> The Austrian pan-German movement produced one of the most zealous antisemitic currents in Europe under the eventual leadership of Georg von Schönerer, but in its early years a number of Austrian Jews, such as Heinrich Friedjung, were also active in pan-German circles.<sup>13</sup> By the late 1880s, both cultural and racial modes of antisemitism had become endemic within the Austrian pan-German movement, and figures like Friedjung had been marginalised or expelled.<sup>14</sup>

During this period, cultural antisemitism played a conspicuous but not decisive role within Steiner’s pan-German journalism. In an 1890 article attacking “stylistic corruption in the press”, for example, Steiner held Jewish journalists at the *Neue Freie Presse* responsible for the “un-German phrases” in its pages, complaining that “Jewish-vernacular idioms and other expressions mocking the German language can be found in every third sentence”.<sup>15</sup> In an 1886 essay for a pan-German periodical, Steiner referred to the Jews as “a people whose religion does not recognise freedom of the spirit”.<sup>16</sup> Combining religious and ethnic prejudices, Steiner alleged that “the people of Jehovah” had no appreciation for the “religion of love”, in stark contrast to the German people, who “unselfishly live for the ideal”.<sup>17</sup> His other writings from the same period occasionally juxtaposed the spiritually creative Germans with the spiritually infertile Jews, and Steiner at this time demanded that Jewry as such should cease to

<sup>12</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *From Symptom to Reality in Modern History*, London 1976, pp. 162–3. Steiner’s most programmatic statement from his active pan-German period is the two-part essay ‘Die deutschnationale Sache in Österreich’, in *Deutsche Wochenschrift: Organ für die nationalen Interessen des deutschen Volkes*, vol. 6, nos. 22 and 25 (1888); reprinted in Steiner, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kultur- und Zeitgeschichte 1887–1901*, Dornach 1966, pp. 111–120. For a description of the crucial role of the *Deutsche Wochenschrift* as mouthpiece of radical German nationalism in Austria, see William McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria*, New Haven 1974, pp. 201–206.

<sup>13</sup>On Friedjung’s deeply conflicted stance towards Judaism and Jewishness, see McGrath, pp. 166–212; Robert Wistrich, ‘The Modernization of Viennese Jewry,’ in Jacob Katz (ed.), *Toward Modernity: The European Jewish Model*, New York 1987; and *idem*, *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph*, Oxford 1989, pp. 159–164. Wistrich, *ibid.*, pp. 162–163, notes that “Friedjung had undoubtedly internalized a certain degree of cultural antisemitism” and that “he insistently demanded that they [Austrian Jews] dissolve completely in the German nation”.

<sup>14</sup>See Bruce Pauley, *From Prejudice to Persecution: A History of Austrian Anti-Semitism*, Chapel Hill 1992, pp. 35–38; Andrew Whiteside, *The Socialism of Fools: Georg von Schönerer and Austrian Pan-Germanism*, Berkeley 1975, pp. 75–140; and Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 142–155.

<sup>15</sup>Rudolf Steiner, ‘Stilkorruption durch die Presse’ (first published in *Nationale Blätter* 1890), in *idem*, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Dramaturgie*, Dornach 1960, p. 36. The Jewish-owned *Neue Freie Presse* was Vienna’s flagship liberal newspaper.

<sup>16</sup>Rudolf Steiner, ‘Deutsche Dichtungen der Gegenwart’ (first published in *Freie Schlesische Presse* 1886), in *idem*, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Literatur 1884–1902*, Dornach 1971, p. 119.

<sup>17</sup>Rudolf Steiner, ‘Zwei nationale Dichter Österreichs’ (first published in *Nationale Blätter* 1890), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Literatur*, p. 127. In 1920, a similar theme resurfaced in Steiner’s work with his suggestion that Judaism was incompatible with “full humanity” (*das volle Menschentum*), which could only come through Christ; Steiner here portrayed both Judaism and the Jewish people as prototypes of nationalism and ethnic separatism and the chief antagonists of universal human qualities. See Steiner, *Die Brücke zwischen der Weltgeistigkeit und dem Physischen des Menschen*, Dornach 1980, p. 218.

exist because it was “a mistake of world history”, an anachronism that needed to be overcome through the gradual elimination and absorption of Jewish identity.

In an 1888 *Deutsche Wochenschrift* review of the book *Homunculus* by the Austrian pan-German author Robert Hamerling, a darling of Schönerer’s faction, Steiner made this point with particular force. Hamerling’s book was a wide-ranging satire that included a crucial antisemitic chapter structured around malicious caricatures of Jews.<sup>18</sup> Among the well-worn anti-Jewish stereotypes that Hamerling employed were the fantasy of a Jewish drive for world domination (the Jews aspire to “the triumph of homunculum on earth”, and emigrate to Palestine in order to “found a new Kingdom of Israel, destined to encompass the whole world eventually”);<sup>19</sup> the Jew as usurer (*Schacherjuden*, *Wucherjuden*, *Börsenjuden*, and *mauschelnde Finanzbarone*);<sup>20</sup> and the Jews’ “concentrated oriental perspiration”.<sup>21</sup> In Hamerling’s portrait, Jews have taken over European newspapers, art, literature, and the medical profession, and live parasitically off the debts of gentiles. At one point he compares “the entire Jewish population” (*das gesamte Judenvolk*) to an anthill, “raucous, wailing, screeching, croaking, raving”.<sup>22</sup>

Steiner vigorously defended Hamerling’s book and excoriated critics who objected to its antisemitism, dismissing these critics as “oversensitive Jews” incapable of reaching an “objective judgement” on the work.<sup>23</sup> The heart of Steiner’s celebratory review of Hamerling’s crude parody was the following passage, in which Steiner laid out his beliefs about the Jews in general terms for the first time:

It certainly cannot be denied that Jewry today still behaves as a closed totality, and that it has frequently intervened in the development of our current state of affairs in a way that is anything but favourable to European ideas of culture. But Jewry as such has long since outlived its time; it has no more justification within the modern life of peoples, and the fact that it continues to exist is a mistake of world history whose consequences are unavoidable. We do not mean the forms of the Jewish religion alone, but above all the spirit of Jewry, the Jewish way of thinking.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup>See Robert Hamerling, *Homunculus*, Hamburg and Leipzig 1888. The book takes the form of an epic poem in ten cantos. The eighth canto, ‘*Im neuen Israel*’, begins with a brief parody of Christian antipathy towards Jews; the bulk of the chapter is devoted to a caustically derisive satire of Jewry in all of its imagined forms. Hamerling used the term “homunculum” to signify what he took to be the negative features of modernity, including rootlessness, crass materialism, soullessness, artificiality, greed, and lust for power. His satire of Jewry begins with a declaration that “the Jewish mind and the Jewish essence” are “akin to homunculum” (p. 207).

<sup>19</sup>Hamerling, pp. 205 and 208.

<sup>20</sup>*ibid.* p. 213.

<sup>21</sup>*ibid.* p. 224.

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.* p. 228. Hamerling remains a popular figure among some anthroposophists who continue to deny the existence of an antisemitic strand within *Homunculus*; see, for example, Thomas Kracht, *Robert Hamerling*, Dornach 1989, pp. 62–3, and the essays by Thomas Meyer, a leading exponent of Steiner, in the Swiss anthroposophist journal *Der Europäer*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>23</sup>Rudolf Steiner, ‘Robert Hamerling: Homunkulus’ (first published in *Deutsche Wochenschrift*, vol. 6, nos. 16 and 17 [1888]) in *idem*, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Literatur*, pp. 145–155; quotes on pp. 148 and 153.

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.* p. 152. Steiner again fully endorsed Hamerling’s *Homunculus*, particularly its statements about Jews, in 1914; cf. *idem*, *Geisteswissenschaft als Lebensgut*, Dornach 1988, pp. 380–396.

Already in this early phase of Steiner's published assessments of Jews, the tension between assimilation and elimination is clearly evident. The established middle-class Viennese Jews who were the chief target of Steiner's diatribe were among the most thoroughly assimilated Jewish communities in the world at the time, and were for the most part markedly pro-German in their cultural outlook. According to Robert Wistrich, the acknowledged leadership of Viennese Jewry in the late nineteenth century shared an "unconditional allegiance to German culture" and "an intense, passionate commitment to German cultural nationalism"; indeed, opposition to "every form of national, religious, or provincial particularism" was the "dominant ideology" within Viennese Jewry at the time Steiner penned his polemic.<sup>25</sup>

In no sense did the Jews of Vienna, much less of the Habsburg lands as a whole, form a "closed totality" in the late 1880s. Indeed historical accounts stress the extremely heterogeneous character of Austrian and especially Viennese Jewry at this time, with its Germanised upper middle class, its substantial Jewish proletariat, Galicians, Hasidim, Viennese Orthodox, Sephardic communities, and so forth. "Even religiously speaking, the Jews were not a cohesive group", writes Menachem Rosensaft. "Culturally, it was equally difficult to see the Jews as a single ethnic unit."<sup>26</sup> Steiner nevertheless held the existence of thriving Jewish communities within Viennese society to be a major obstacle to the progress of Austro-German spiritual life. Overcoming this obstacle would mean eliminating the "Jewish way of thinking".<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the twenty-seven year old Steiner declared, the Jewish people had no more reason to exist in the modern world.

#### PHILOSEMITISM AND OPPOSITION TO ZIONISM

By the late 1890s, when he moved to Berlin, Steiner's worldview had taken on a peculiar mix of Idealist, Romantic, individualist, and anti-clerical tones, under the influence of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Stirner, and Ernst Haeckel. It is from this transitional period that his denunciations of political antisemitism stem. At the same time, Steiner was an early and energetic critic of the Zionist movement in Central Europe, and in the course of his polemics against Zionism he frequently downplayed the significance of organised antisemitism and occasionally relied on antisemitic arguments. In an 1897 essay on the Basel Zionist Congress, Steiner attributed widespread concern over antisemitism to "Jewish hypersensitivity":

<sup>25</sup>Wistrich, 'Modernization of Viennese Jewry', pp. 50–51. See also Marsha Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna 1867–1914: Assimilation and Identity*, Albany 1983, pp. 150–163, and William McCagg, 'The Assimilation of Jews in Austria', in Bela Vago (ed.), *Jewish Assimilation in Modern Times*, Boulder 1981, pp. 126–139.

<sup>26</sup>Menachem Rosensaft, 'Jews and Antisemites in Austria at the End of the Nineteenth Century', in *LBI Year Book*, vol. 21 (1976), pp. 66–67.

<sup>27</sup>Two of Steiner's specific Jewish targets were Daniel Spitzer, the famed *feuilleton* writer for the *Neue Freie Presse*, and Josef Bloch, a prominent member of the Austrian parliament who advocated Jewish integration and cooperation among the empire's myriad national groups. Both Spitzer and Bloch were well known for their cosmopolitan views and their cultivation of an inclusive notion of "Austrianness" forming an explicit contrast with ethnic exclusivity.



Actual antisemitism is not the cause of this Jewish hypersensitivity, but rather the false image of the anti-Jewish movement invented by overwrought imaginations. Anyone who has dealt with Jews knows how deep runs the tendency to create such an image, even among the best of their nation. Mistrust towards non-Jews has completely taken over their souls.<sup>28</sup>

In the same essay Steiner dismissed the threat of open antisemitism—at the time an increasingly popular and militant force in much of Europe—and declared that the Zionists were a greater danger than the antisemites:

I consider the antisemites to be harmless people. The best of them are like children. They want something to blame for their woes. ... Much worse than the antisemites are the heartless leaders of the Jews who are tired of Europe, Herzl and Nordau. They exaggerate an unpleasant childishness into a world-historical trend; they pretend that a harmless squabble is a terrible roar of cannons. They are seducers and tempters of their people.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, despite the fact that Zionism was at the time a movement with little support among German Jews, Steiner occasionally portrayed it as both an expression of the fundamentally national character of the Jewish people and as the chief cause of antisemitism.<sup>30</sup> In any event, while remarks such as the above represent a serious failure of judgement, they do indicate a basic disapproval of antisemitism as a regressive cultural phenomenon. This marks a noteworthy transition from Steiner's earlier pan-German phase.<sup>31</sup> Steiner's shifting understanding of the "Jewish question" around the turn of the century was due in part to his friendship with the Jewish author Ludwig Jacobowski.<sup>32</sup> Jacobowski himself was a conflicted figure who favoured, in his own words, "the complete disappearance of Jewry into the German spirit".<sup>33</sup> What Steiner admired in his friend was that Jacobowski had "outgrown Jewishness", as Steiner put it.<sup>34</sup> After Jacobowski's unexpected death in 1900, Steiner

<sup>28</sup>Rudolf Steiner, 'Die Schnsucht der Juden nach Palästina', *Magazin für Literatur*, vol. 66, no. 38 (1897); reprinted in Steiner, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kultur- und Zeitgeschichte*, pp. 196–201, quote on p. 198.

<sup>29</sup>*ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>30</sup>This view is spelled out in *ibid.*; see also Rudolf Steiner, 'Specters of the Old Testament in the Nationalism of the Present' in *idem*, *The Challenge of the Times*, Spring Valley 1941, pp. 152–178; and *idem*, 'Vom Wesen des Judentums', *Geschichte der Menschheit*, pp. 179–196.

<sup>31</sup>Steiner had criticised antisemitism in his review of Hamerling's *Homunculus*, but did so by placing Jews and antisemites on the same level: "In this canto, Hamerling confronts both the Jews and the antisemites with the superior objectivity of a wise sage." Rudolf Steiner, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Literatur*, p. 148.

<sup>32</sup>For background on Jacobowski, see Itta Shedletzky, 'Ludwig Jacobowski und Jakob Loewenberg', in Stephane Moses and Albrecht Schöne (eds.), *Juden in der deutschen Literatur*, Frankfurt 1986; Ritchie Robertson, *The 'Jewish Question' in German Literature*, Oxford 1999, pp. 278–280; Sanford Ragins, *Jewish Responses to Anti-Semitism in Germany 1870–1914*, Cincinnati 1980, pp. 42–44; from a perspective sympathetic to Steiner, see Fred Stern, *Ludwig Jacobowski*, Darmstadt 1966.

<sup>33</sup>Jacobowski in 1898, quoted in Shedletzky, p. 195.

<sup>34</sup>Rudolf Steiner, foreword to Jacobowski, *Ausklang. Neue Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß*, Minden 1901, p. 17. Neither of Steiner's lengthy obituaries for Jacobowski mentions his Jewish origins (see *idem*, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Literatur*, pp. 92–104); instead Steiner emphasised Jacobowski's dedication to "German spiritual life" (*ibid.*, p. 92).

wrote a series of articles for the newsletter of the *Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus*, the Association Against Antisemitism, with which Jacobowski had been affiliated.<sup>35</sup>

These articles offer sincere and genuine criticisms of *fin-de-siècle* antisemitic discourse, though they depend in part on assumptions that were fundamentally irreconcilable with continued Jewish existence within German society. Steiner denounced organised, overt antisemitism as incompatible with the highest ideals of German culture, and proposed a sort of super-patriotic solution whereby German Jews would prove themselves more German than their detractors; in one of the articles Steiner characterised antisemitism as “un-German”. Questionable though such views may be, his rejection of antisemitism was unambiguous:

For me there has never been a Jewish question. My course of development was such that when part of the nationalist student movement in Austria became antisemitic, this seemed to me a mockery of all the educational achievements of modern times. I have never been able to judge people by anything other than their individual, personal character traits. Whether someone was a Jew or not was always a matter of complete indifference to me. I can say that this remains my opinion today. And I have never been able to see anything in antisemitism other than intellectual inferiority, poor ethical judgement, and lack of taste.<sup>36</sup>

In another article from this period, Steiner invoked humanist and Enlightenment values to condemn antisemitism:

Antisemitism makes a mockery of all faith in ideas. Above all it flies in the face of the idea that humanity stands higher than any single form (people, race, nation) in which humankind appears. ... Antisemitism is a danger not only for the Jews, it is a danger for non-Jews as well. It results from a mindset which does not take sound and honest judgement seriously. It promotes this sort of mindset. And those who think philosophically should not quietly stand by in the face of this. Faith in ideas will only be restored if we combat the opposing lack of such faith in all areas as energetically as possible.<sup>37</sup>

Although latter-day anthroposophists frequently point to these essays as representative of Steiner’s lifelong views on the subject, this series of articles was in fact confined to a brief period in 1900 and 1901, when Steiner was still under the influence of Jacobowski. His position shifted markedly once more as he embarked on the mature phase of his career.

<sup>35</sup>For critical discussion of the *Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus* and its policies, see Ismar Schorsch, *Jewish Reactions to German Anti-Semitism 1870–1914*, New York 1972, particularly chapter three; and Barbara Suchy, ‘The Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus’, in *LBI Year Book*, vol. 28 (1983) pp. 205–239 and *ibid.*, vol. 30 (1985), pp. 67–103.

<sup>36</sup>Rudolf Steiner, ‘Ahasver’, in *Magazin für Literatur*, vol. 69, no. 35 (1900); reprinted in *idem*, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kultur- und Zeitgeschichte*, pp. 378–9. It must be noted that Steiner’s autobiographical claims in this passage are belied by his earlier polemics against “Jewry as such”.

<sup>37</sup>*idem*, ‘Verschämter Antisemitismus’, in *Mitteilungen aus dem Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus*, vol. 11, no. 46, p. 380; reprinted in *idem*, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kultur- und Zeitgeschichte*, pp. 412–13.

## ESOTERIC ANTISEMITISM

Steiner again experienced a fundamental internal transformation around 1901–1902, turning emphatically towards the syncretistic occult doctrine of theosophy while retaining a number of his prior intellectual commitments, for example his attachment to Haeckel's Monism. This odd mixture of worldviews yielded a kind of social Darwinist belief in progressive evolution, wedded to the idea of reincarnation, within an all-encompassing esoteric spiritual framework, an "occult science" as Steiner called it.<sup>38</sup> He became General Secretary of the German branch of the Theosophical Society in 1902, and served in this capacity until breaking away to form the Anthroposophical Society in 1913. Upon his turn to occultism after 1901, the Aryan myth took on a central role in Steiner's cosmology, where it was borrowed from classical theosophy, which routinely extolled the wonders of "Aryan blood" and the heroic "Aryan race".<sup>39</sup>

The theosophical movement combined organisational and confessional pluralism with ideological racism and pointed antisemitism. While anyone of any race, nationality and creed was welcome to join the Theosophical Society, central theosophical texts displayed a persistent anti-Jewish bias. According to Helena Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater, and other leading theosophists, Jews were the opposite of Aryans: materialistic, devious, power-hungry and unspiritual. In *The Key to Theosophy* Blavatsky declared: "if the root of mankind is one, then there must also be one truth which finds expression in all the various religions—except in the Jewish".<sup>40</sup> In her magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine* Blavatsky emphasised "the immense chasm between Aryan and Semitic religious thought, the two opposite poles, Sincerity and Concealment".<sup>41</sup> This theme recurs throughout this work, the fundamental scripture for the theosophical movement:

<sup>38</sup>Cf. *idem*, *Outline of Occult Science*, London 1972. For a trenchant critique of occultist thinking, see Theodor Adorno, "Theses Against Occultism", in *idem*, *Minima Moralia*, New York 1978, pp. 238–244.

<sup>39</sup>See for example Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, London 1893, vol. 1, pp. 408–412, vol. 2, pp. 209–210, 331–332, 491–495, vol. 3, pp. 187–189; Annie Besant, *The Pedigree of Man*, London 1904, pp. 89–90, 104–109, 143–146; Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, London 1913, pp. 239–289, 330–331. Steiner invoked the Aryan myth in many of his central anthroposophical works, from *Cosmic Memory*, Hudson 1987, pp. 45–68, to *Die Welträtsel und die Anthroposophie*, Dornach 1985, pp. 49–50, 132–154. For a pioneering overview of "Aryan"-centred concepts see Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth*, New York 1974.

<sup>40</sup>Helena Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, London 1889, p. 45. Steiner published a German translation of this book in 1907. On the Theosophical legacy in Germany see George Mosse, 'The Occult Origins of National Socialism', in *idem*, Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution*, New York 1999, pp. 117–135; Jeffrey Goldstein, 'On Racism and Anti-Semitism in Occultism and Nazism', in *Yad Vashem Studies* vol. 13 (1979), pp. 53–72; Jackson Spielvogel and David Redles, 'Hitler's Racial Ideology: Content and Occult Sources', in *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, vol. 3 (1986), pp. 227–246; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, New York 1992, *passim*.

<sup>41</sup>Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 411. This work is the proximate source of the "root-race" concept. Robert Ellwood disputes the notion that Blavatsky's writing contains significant antisemitic elements. See Robert Ellwood, 'The American Theosophical Synthesis', in Howard Kerr and Charles Crow (eds.), *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, Chicago 1983, pp. 132–133; as well as Robert Ellwood, 'Review: *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*', *Theosophical History*, vol. 8, no. 5 (2001), pp. 168–169. Ellwood does not discuss *The Secret Doctrine*.

The Aryan views of the symbolism were those of the whole Pagan world; the Semite interpretations emanated from and were preeminently those of a small tribe, thus marking its national features and the idiosyncratic defects that characterize many of the Jews to this day—gross realism, selfishness, and sensuality. ... There was a day when the Israelites had beliefs as pure as the Aryans have. But now Judaism ... has become one of the latest creeds in Asia, and theologically a religion of hate and malice toward everyone and everything outside of itself.<sup>42</sup>

In his mature theosophical-anthroposophical phase, Steiner built on this inauspicious foundation and elaborated his own theory of “root races”. This theory was predicated on the dominance of the Aryan race:

We are within the great Root Race of humanity that has peopled the earth since the land on which we now live rose up out of the inundations of the ocean. Ever since the Atlantean Race began slowly to disappear, the great Aryan Race has been the dominant one on earth. If we contemplate ourselves, we here in Europe are thus the fifth Sub-Race of the great Aryan Root Race.<sup>43</sup>

The particulars of Steiner’s root-race doctrine are so fantastic that they largely resist scholarly analysis. Anthroposophy teaches that the “Aryan root-race” emerged on the lost continent of Atlantis, and that the Atlantean root-race was itself preceded by a still older root-race that inhabited another lost continent, Lemuria, which was destroyed thousands of years before Atlantis; non-white and indigenous communities today are the degenerate remnants of these earlier root races. The guiding thread throughout this race mythology is the motif of a small, racially advanced group progressing into the next era while the great mass of backward populations declines; in one central sense, racial inequality is the backbone of the entire narrative.<sup>44</sup>

From Steiner’s newfound theosophical perspective, racial progress constituted a fundamental aspect of spiritual development and human liberation, a process built around the overcoming of “lower racial forms”:

For peoples and races are but steps leading to pure humanity. A race or a nation stands so much the higher, the more perfectly its members express the pure, ideal human type, the further they have worked their way from the physical and perishable to the supersensible and imperishable. The evolution of man through the incarnations in ever

<sup>42</sup>Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* vol. 2, pp. 492–494. A number of anthroposophists continued this line of thinking. Steiner’s student Ernst Uehli, for example, emphasised the fundamentally different racial makeup of “the Semitic and the Aryan peoples”: whereas “the Germans were a people of nature”, “the Jews succumbed to Ahriman and were therefore unable to recognise Christ in the flesh” (*idem*, *Nordisch-Germanische Mythologie*, pp. 144 and 147; “Ahriman” is the anthroposophical term for demonic forces that promote materialism and abstract intellectualism).

<sup>43</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *The Temple Legend*, London 1997 (lecture from 1906), p. 201.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. *idem*, *Cosmic Memory*, New York 1987 (first published 1909), p. 46: “Each root race has physical and mental characteristics which are quite different from those of the preceding one. ... Thus there are always populations which show different stages of development living beside each other on earth.” For an unreliable but instructive account of Steiner’s racial theories from an anthroposophical perspective *Anthroposophie und die Frage der Rassen*, Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 81–299 and *passim*.

higher national and racial forms is thus a process of liberation. Man must finally appear in harmonious perfection.<sup>45</sup>

As this passage indicates, Steiner's racial teachings additionally pointed towards a future beyond racial and ethnic conflict, when a "Universal Human" would emerge that transcended all forms of national and racial particularity.<sup>46</sup> Indeed the eventual arrival of this ideal stage of human existence was a centrepiece of Steiner's conception of evolution. In order to reach this goal, he declared, all archaic ethnic identities must be discarded and subsumed under the forward march of evolutionary progress. In this sense, Steiner sometimes announced that racial character itself would disappear in the future. In a 1917 lecture to anthroposophists Steiner explained the temporal limits of his racial theory:

A fourteenth-century person who spoke of the ideals of race and nation would have been speaking in terms of the progressive tendencies of human evolution; someone who speaks of the ideal of race and nation and of tribal membership today is speaking of impulses which are part of the decline of humanity. If anyone now considers them to be progressive ideals to present to humanity, this is an untruth. Nothing is more designed to take humanity into its decline than the propagation of the ideals of race, nation and blood. Nothing is more likely to prevent human progress than proclamations of national ideals belonging to earlier centuries which continue to be preserved by the luciferic and ahrimanic powers. The true ideal must arise from what we find in the world of the spirit, not in the blood.<sup>47</sup>

Jews occupied an ambivalent location within this simultaneously racialised and non-racialised scheme of cosmic development, and they frequently figured as the principal promoters of "ideals of race, nation and blood". In the context of theosophical doctrine, Steiner's earlier cultural antisemitism thus became fused with racial notions and occult premises. The anthroposophist Steiner saw Jews not only as an atavistic leftover, a remnant of long bygone eras, but as biologically different from all other people, especially regarding their blood. In his 1910 lectures to Scandinavian theosophists on 'The Mission of National Souls' Steiner emphasised that "racial continuity through the blood-stream was of particular importance to the Semitic-Hebrew people":

[T]he Jahve forces from the moon sphere meet and cooperate with the Mars spirits and thus a special kind of modification arises, namely, the Semitic race. Here is the occult explanation for the origin of the Semites. The Semitic people are an example of a modification of collective humanity. Jahve or Jehovah shuts himself off from the other

<sup>45</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, London 1969 (first published 1905), p. 207. For a similar description see *idem*, *At the Gates of Spiritual Science*, London 1970 (lecture from 1906), pp. 65–74, as well as *idem*, *Universe, Earth and Man*, London 1987 (lecture from 1908), pp. 88–91. Steiner explicated his racial views in detail in the following lectures: "Die Grundbegriffe der Theosophie: Menschenrassen", in *idem*, *Die Welträtsel und die Anthroposophie*; "The Manifestation of the Ego in the Different Races of Men", in *idem*, *The Being of Man and His Future Evolution*, London 1981; and "Farbe und Menschenrassen", in *idem*, *Vom Leben des Menschen und der Erde*, Dornach 1993.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. *idem*, *The Universal Human*, New York 1990.

<sup>47</sup>*idem*, "The Spirits of Light and the Spirits of Darkness" in *The Fall of the Spirits of Darkness*, London 1993, pp. 180–193, here p. 186. The same lecture includes Steiner's standard association of heredity and "blood bonds" with Judaism: pp. 182–183.

Elohim and invests this people with a special character by cooperating with the Mars spirits, in order to bring about a special modification of his people. You will now understand the peculiar character of the Semitic people and its mission.<sup>48</sup>

In Steiner's eyes, ethnic exclusiveness was the hallmark of Jewish identity; he accused the Jews of "national egoism", along with materialism, abstract thinking and an obstinate refusal of progress.<sup>49</sup> In a remarkable about-face from his 1900–1901 writings, by 1905 Steiner was complaining to his future wife about the "corrosive" (*zersetzend*) and "totally materialistic" consequences of the "continuing Semitic influence" within the "Aryan epoch".<sup>50</sup>

This tendency continued throughout Steiner's final anthroposophical period, even after his organisational break with mainstream theosophy in 1913.<sup>51</sup> In a 1918 lecture on 'Specters of the Old Testament in the Nationalism of the Present', for example, he strongly associated the Jews with a "social element that is antisocial as regards the whole of humanity" and insisted that "Jewish culture was a folk culture, not an individualized culture of humanity".<sup>52</sup> Echoing Blavatsky's characterisation of the Jews as an "unspiritual people", Steiner declared categorically in 1924: "The Jews have a great aptitude for materialism, but little aptitude for the appreciation of the spiritual world."<sup>53</sup> Steiner moreover endorsed Richard Wagner's views on Jews and praised notoriously antisemitic figures such as Treitschke and de Lagarde; his anti-Jewish rhetoric occasionally achieved full-blown *völkisch* proportions.<sup>54</sup> He was also an enthusiastic backer of the *völkisch* author Friedrich Lienhard, one of the leading lights of "idealistic antisemitism" in the late Wilhelminian period.<sup>55</sup> In 1916

<sup>48</sup>*idem*, "The five Root Races of Mankind" in *The Mission of the Individual Folk Souls in Relation to Teutonic Mythology*, London 1970, pp. 97–110, here p. 105.

<sup>49</sup>See, for example, *idem*, *Die Geschichte der Menschheit und die Weltanschauungen der Kulturvölker*, pp. 185 and 195; *idem*, *The Challenge of the Times*, pp. 26–33.

<sup>50</sup>*idem*, *Briefwechsel und Dokumente 1901–1925*, Dornach 1967, pp. 62–63. For background information on the longstanding antisemitic connotations of many of these ideas see Christoph Gobet, *Der Wortschatz des Antisemitismus in der Bismarckzeit*, Munich 1973.

<sup>51</sup>Similar themes preoccupied a number of the first generation of Steiner's students. Helga Scheel-Geelmuyden described the Jews, who "rejected the Son of the Virgin", as "a scattered people that appears everywhere as the agent of the atomistic elements of our intellectual culture", see *idem*, 'Die Schöpfung des Menschen im Nordischen Mythos', in *Die Drei. Monatsschrift für Anthroposophie*, vol. 5, no. 8 (1925), p. 629. August Pauli held the Jews largely responsible for the "disintegrating effects of intellectualism and materialism", see *idem*, *Blut und Geist*, Stuttgart 1932, p. 29. Friedrich Rittelmeyer associated the Jews with "the egoistic-intellectualistic-materialist spirit", see *idem*, *Rudolf Steiner als Führer zu neuem Christentum*, Stuttgart 1933, p. 84.

<sup>52</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *The Challenge of the Times*, p. 166.

<sup>53</sup>*idem*, *Geschichte der Menschheit*, p. 70; cf. *idem*, *From Beetroot to Buddhism*, London 1999, p. 59.

<sup>54</sup>For Steiner's endorsement of Wagner's anti-Jewish tracts, see *idem*, *Die okkulten Wahrheiten alter Mythen und Sagen*, Dornach 1999, pp. 138–139; on Lagarde, see *idem*, *Aus schicksaltragender Zeit*, Dornach 1959, pp. 224–226. For a dual endorsement of Wagner and Gobineau, particularly their racial theories, see *idem*, *Das christliche Mysterium*, Dornach 1968, pp. 250–256. The latter text may be based on a compromised source; see the editorial note on p. 305.

<sup>55</sup>See, for example, *idem*, *Aus schicksaltragender Zeit* p. 288. For background on Lienhard and "idealistic antisemitism" see Uwe Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich*, Darmstadt 2001, pp. 54–57 and 71–76; and Hildegard Chatellier, 'Friedrich Lienhard', in Puschner, Schmitz, and Ulbricht, *Handbuch zur Völkischen Bewegung*. Roderick Stackelberg reports that Lienhard rejected anthroposophy later in life; see *idem*, *Idealism Debated*, Kent 1981, p. 93. On Lienhard as an assimilationist antisemite see *ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

Steiner referred to Lienhard as a supporter of “our movement” whose worldview expressed “the German essence”.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the fundamentally racist theosophical-anthroposophical framework, however, and despite his harshly negative judgement on Jews and Judaism, Steiner did not draw the standard conclusions of racial antisemitism, but remained committed to an assimilationist “solution” to the “Jewish question”.<sup>57</sup> This idiosyncratic combination was bound up with his teleology of “the pure, ideal human type” and the notion of racial progress through reincarnation.

According to Steiner’s theory of racial karma, each soul works its way upward through a series of successively higher racial forms over the course of many incarnations. The goal of this process, which might be characterised as a variety of spiritual eugenics, is eventually to escape particular racial and ethnic attributes altogether and achieve a sort of absolute individuality, the “Universal Human”. The German people occupied a special place in this development, as pre-eminent representatives of the fully realised “I” or consummate individuality. The ancient Hebrews also had a crucial role to play in this unfolding drama of cosmic evolution: their “mission” was to prepare the way for Christ, the bearer of universal humanity.<sup>58</sup> In Steiner’s racial theory, however, the Jewish mission—to serve as vehicle for the appearance of Christ in the physical realm—had been fulfilled two thousand years earlier, and ever since then there was simply no more reason for the Jews to exist.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *Gegenwärtiges und Vergangenes im Menschengeste*, Dornach 1962, p. 10. On Steiner’s relationship to the *völkisch* movement in general, see James Webb, *The Occult Establishment*, La Salle 1976, pp. 61–72, 285–290.

<sup>57</sup>This was not always the case among Steiner’s followers. The anthroposophical association between Jewishness and abstract intellectualism—a common trope within the antisemitic discourse of the time—resurfaced in official correspondence during the Nazi era with decidedly “dissimilationist” implications. A memorandum from the Association of Waldorf Schools to Rudolf Hess from March 1935 declares, under the subheading “Attitude towards Jewry”: “Because the basic outlook of Waldorf schools is emphatically Christian, and because Waldorf pedagogy rejects the one-sided intellectual element, the Jews show little sympathy for Waldorf schools. The percentage of Jewish pupils is therefore very low.” in Bund der Waldorfschulen an Reichsminister Rudolf Heß, 2. März 1935; photographic reproduction in Arfst Wagner, *Dokumente und Briefe zur Geschichte der Anthroposophischen Bewegung in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus* vol. 2, Rendsburg 1991, pp. 83–100; quote on p. 93. An apologetic account of anthroposophist behavior during the Third Reich can be found in Uwe Werner, *Anthroposophen in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, Munich 1999.

<sup>58</sup>See, for example, Steiner’s 1909 lecture on “Die Mission des hebräischen Volkes”, in Rudolf Steiner, *Das Lukas-Evangelium*, Dornach 1949, pp. 122–139; *idem*, *Deeper Secrets of Human History*, London 1985, *passim*. Cf. Hans Frei, ‘Die Hebräische Geschichte in ihren Haupteinschnitten als Vorbereitung der Christus-Offenbarung’, in *Die Drei: Monatsschrift für Anthroposophie*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1926), pp. 208–222; Friedrich Rittelmeyer, ‘Judentum und Christentum’, in *Die Christengemeinschaft*, vol. 10, no. 10 (1934), pp. 291–298. While expressing a kind of appreciation for the ancient Hebrews as forerunners of Christ, on at least one occasion Steiner blamed the Jews for Christ’s death; see Rudolf Steiner, “Die Völkerseelen und das Mysterium von Golgotha” (lecture from 1918), in *idem*, *Erdensterben und Weltenleben*, Dornach 1967, pp. 158–9.

<sup>59</sup>Steiner’s student Ludwig Thieben, a sort of anthroposophical Otto Weininger, developed this theme at length in his book on “the enigma of Jewry” (*Das Rätsel des Judentums*). Thieben emphasised “the momentous difference between the Aryan and the true Jew” (p. 202) and decried the “ manifold harmful influence of the Jewish essence” (p. 174); he described modern Jewry as “the people which like no other resists Christianity, through the very nature of its blood” (p. 164) and associated the Jews with all of the purported evils of modernity: “The rationalism which pervades all of Jewry is intimately linked to the Jews’ basic heteronomous disposition. This yields an essential internal correlation to ... modern natural science, to the capitalist economic forms of contemporary times as well as to communism and its materialistic and intellectualistic ideas.” (p. 134).

This notion, a variant of Christian supersessionist theology, persists within anthroposophical circles today.<sup>60</sup>

Hence it may be accurate to say that from Steiner's mature perspective, the task for modern Jews was to abandon their Jewishness, to consciously and deliberately repudiate Jewish existence by embracing Steiner's esoteric version of Christianity and his theory of German spiritual supremacy. In the current stage of the cosmic plan, according to this interpretation of anthroposophy, the Aryans, and especially the Germans, are the carriers of true individuality and of the universal human. It is the mission of the German *Volk*, with its German essence, to lead the way in refining the "I", the highest member of the human being, which is the necessary next step in spiritual evolution.<sup>61</sup>

### FROM ASSIMILATION TO ELIMINATION

The existence of Jews, according to Steiner, was a major stumbling block to this all-important cosmic destiny. Within the anthroposophical framework, Steiner saw Jewry as the primary embodiment of "group-soulness", the very negation of individuality.<sup>62</sup> Because Jews were, in Steiner's eyes, stubbornly attached to ethnic particularity, they were hindering the course of evolutionary progress towards the universal human. One of Steiner's favourite images for expressing this theme was the myth of Ahasver:

The relation between soul-development and race-development is preserved to us in a wonderful myth. Let us imagine race following race, civilisation following civilisation. The soul going through its earth mission in the right way is incarnated in a certain race; it strives upward in this race, and acquires the capacities of this race in order next time to be incarnated in a higher one. Only the souls which sink in the race and do not work out of the physical materiality, are held back in the race by their own weight, as one might say. They appear a second time in the same race and eventually a third time in bodies in similarly formed races. Such souls hold back the bodies of the race. ... If we follow this thought to its conclusion such a soul would have to appear again and again in the same race, and we have the legend of Ahasuerus who had to appear in the same race again and again because he rejected Christ Jesus. Great truths concerning the evolution of humanity are placed before us in such a legend as this.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup>Roy Wilkinson, *Rudolf Steiner: Aspects of his Spiritual Worldview*, London 1993, vol. 3, p. 71, writes: "The mission of the Jewish people was to provide a suitable physical vehicle for the Christ spirit to enter." James Hindes, *Renewing Christianity: Rudolf Steiner's Ideas in Practice*, London 1995, p. 52 explains that "the Hebrew mission", long since accomplished, was to prepare the way for the incarnation of Christ, and that "The higher self of the human being, necessary for true freedom, could enter humanity only with Christ's entry into Jesus of Nazareth."

<sup>61</sup>See for example Rudolf Steiner, *Bewußtseins-Notwendigkeiten für Gegenwart und Zukunft*, Dornach 1967, p. 403. Steiner's followers continued this stance; see for example Friedrich Rittelmeyer, *Rudolf Steiner als Führer zu neuem Christentum*, p. 78: "Dazu ist der Deutsche gerade berufen, die heilige Wahrheit vom Ich der ganzen Menschheit zu bringen." For a recent re-affirmation of this anthroposophical tenet see Pietro Archiati, *Die Überwindung des Rassismus durch die Geisteswissenschaft Rudolf Steiners*, Dornach 1997.

<sup>62</sup>See for example Rudolf Steiner, *The Universal Human*, pp. 9–10, and *idem*, *Das Hereinwirken geistiger Wesenheiten in den Menschen*, Dornach 2001, pp. 100–101, 191–192.

<sup>63</sup>*idem*, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, London 1958 (lecture from 1908), pp. 80–81.



Steiner embraced this hoary antisemitic legend and used it repeatedly as his ideal example of a racially backward soul, a soul that refuses racial progress and therefore must reincarnate over and over again as a Jew. In a lecture in Kassel in 1907, Steiner deployed the myth of the Wandering Jew to illustrate the contrast between racial advance and racial stagnation:

How could one express this more clearly than in the image of the person who rejects the leader, and who is incapable of advancing! That is the legend of Ahasver, the Wandering Jew, who sat there and pushed away the greatest leader, Christ Jesus, who wanted nothing to do with evolution, and who therefore must remain in his race, must always reappear in his race.<sup>64</sup>

A year later Steiner repeated this point with a more explicitly racist emphasis:

People who listen to the great leaders of humankind, and preserve their soul with its eternal essence, reincarnate in an advanced race; in the same way he who ignores the great teacher, who rejects the great leader of humankind, will always reincarnate in the same race, because he was only able to develop the one form. This is the deeper meaning of Ahasver, who must always reappear in the same form because he rejected the hand of the greatest leader, Christ. Thus each person has the opportunity to become caught up in the essence of one incarnation, to push away the leader of humankind, or instead to undergo the transformation into higher races, towards ever higher perfection. Races would never become decadent, never decline, if there weren't souls that are unable to move up and unwilling to move up to a higher racial form. Look at the races that have survived from earlier eras: they only exist because some souls could not climb higher.<sup>65</sup>

Jewishness, in other words, is not only emblematic of cultural and spiritual parochialism, it is the very paradigm of evolutionary regression. The later Steiner opposed latter-day Jewry because in his eyes it was not progressive, because it was anti-universal, because it failed to live up to his standards of genuine humanness.<sup>66</sup> Steiner's rhetoric occasionally evinced a paternalistic concern for the salvation of the Jews themselves via the abandonment of Jewishness. Within the wider context of anthroposophical race theory, such a suggestion was at best a double-edged sword. Steven Aschheim notes of similar cases: "This claim, that the attack upon Judaism was based on a humanist, even redemptive concern for the Jew, later became, as we shall see, a *leitmotif* of many antisemites."<sup>67</sup> Saul Friedländer's discussion of "redemptive anti-Semitism" likewise emphasises the ways in which "the very existence of a Jewish difference" prompted "various forms of nonracial

<sup>64</sup>*idem*, *Menschheitsentwicklung und Christus-Erkenntnis*, Dornach 1967, p. 187. On the history of the myth of Ahasuerus see George Anderson, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew*, Providence 1965; Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes, *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend*, Bloomington 1986.

<sup>65</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *Das Heräinwirken geistiger Wesenheiten in den Menschen*, p. 174.

<sup>66</sup>For a discussion of several Protestant spokespeople in the Weimar era who likewise combined philosemitic and antisemitic beliefs while arguing that Jewish existence embodied an obsolete form of particularity and "a regression from universal humaneness", see Uriel Tal, 'Modern Lutheranism and the Jews', in *LBI Year Book*, vol. 30 (1985), pp. 203–215 (quote on p. 205).

<sup>67</sup>Steven Aschheim, *Culture and Catastrophe*, New York 1996, p. 46.

anti-Jewish resentment” that demanded the “total collective disappearance” of Jewry.<sup>68</sup> Much of what Steiner had to say about the “Jewish question” during the peak of his career fits this pattern.

In one of his last substantial statements on the topic, a 1924 lecture on ‘The Essence of Jewry’, Steiner forcefully recapitulated his radical assimilationist stance.<sup>69</sup> A passing comment in this lecture has sparked contentious disagreement between critics and defenders of Steiner and somewhat overshadowed its central message. The disputed comment concerns the relation between Jewishness and national chauvinism and their respective roles in inciting the First World War. In the midst of condemning Zionism as archaic and unmodern, the epitome of outdated segregationist impulses and the very opposite of his ideal of universal humanity, Steiner traced nationalist aspirations as such back to this paradigm, and flirted with the notion that the Jews were responsible for the First World War. Recounting a discussion about nationalism he had once had with a Zionist, Steiner told his anthroposophist audience:

This discussion that I have just described to you took place before the Great War of 1914 to 1918, you see. The fact that people no longer want the great universal-human principles, but prefer to segregate themselves and develop national forces, that is exactly what led to the Great War! Thus the greatest tragedy of this 20th century has come from what the Jews are also striving for. And one can say that since everything the Jews have done can now be done consciously by all people, the best thing that the Jews could do would be to dissolve in the rest of humankind, to blend in with the rest of humankind, so that Jewry as a people would simply cease to exist. That is what would be ideal. Even today many Jewish habits work against this ideal—as does, above all, other people’s hatred. That is what must be overcome.<sup>70</sup>

While this passage overtly invokes Steiner’s habitual association of nationalism with Jewishness in general, the notion of a specifically Jewish responsibility for the First World War did have some currency among Steiner’s close followers. Steiner himself characterised the war as “a conspiracy against German spiritual life”,<sup>71</sup> and in 1919 he wrote the foreword to the book *Entente-Freimaurerei und Weltkrieg* by the far-right anthroposophist Karl Heise, which blamed the war in part on “*verjudete*

<sup>68</sup>Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* volume I, New York 1997, p. 82.

<sup>69</sup>Rudolf Steiner, “Vom Wesen des Judentums” (lecture delivered in Dornach, 8 May 1924), in *idem*, *Geschichte der Menschheit*, pp. 179–196. This chapter on “The Essence of Jewry” was excised from the (otherwise complete) authorised English translation of the book; cf. Steiner, *From Beetroot to Buddhism*, Rudolf Steiner Press, London 1999.

<sup>70</sup>Steiner, ‘Vom Wesen des Judentums’, *Geschichte der Menschheit*, p. 189. Julia Iwersen interprets this passage as a straightforward assertion of “Jewish responsibility for the First World War”; cf. *idem*, ‘Anthroposophie und Antisemitismus’, p. 155. The anthroposophist historian Ralf Sonnenberg sharply rejects this reading; cf. Sonnenberg, ‘Judentum, Zionismus und Antisemitismus aus der Sicht Rudolf Steiners’, p. 209. If Iwersen’s conclusion is too hasty and simplified, Sonnenberg’s interpretation ignores the central role Steiner imputed to Jewry as the quintessence of ethnic insularity and obsolete national ambitions. For Steiner, Jewishness itself was the epitome of narrow nationalism.

<sup>71</sup>Steiner, *Die geistigen Hintergründe des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Dornach 1974, p. 27. See also the very revealing compilation *Rudolf Steiner während des Weltkrieges*, ed. by Roman Boos, Dornach 1933.

*Entente-Freimaurerei* ("Judaised Western freemasonry").<sup>72</sup> Steiner's work also contains a number of suggestive passages that seem to point towards a millennia-old Jewish striving for world domination. According to Steiner, the ancient Hebrews believed "that the earth could only become happy if everything else would die off and only the members of this people would fill the whole world".<sup>73</sup>

More important than the question of the war, however, is the way in which the 1924 lecture on "The Essence of Jewry" unites the main strands in Steiner's attitude towards Jewishness as such. In the passage quoted above, calling on Jews to "disappear into the rest of humankind", Steiner once more brings together the themes of his youth, combining his persistent wish that "Jewry as a people would simply cease to exist" with his recognition that "the hatred of other people" stands in the way of such a radical form of assimilation and amalgamation. The lecture ends, however, on a less charitable note, strongly emphasising the Jews' own culpability in this failed subsumption of Jewishness into universal humanness:

Today all aspects of the Jews are dominated by racial qualities. Above all they marry among themselves. They see the racial qualities, not the spiritual. And this is what must be said in reply to the question: has the Jewish people fulfilled its mission within the evolution of human knowledge? It has fulfilled it; for in earlier times one single people was needed to bring about a certain monotheism. But today spiritual insight itself is necessary. Therefore this mission has been fulfilled. And therefore this Jewish mission as such, as a Jewish mission, is no longer necessary in evolution; instead the only proper thing would be for the Jews to blend in with the other peoples and disappear into the other peoples.<sup>74</sup>

This passage, from the final year of Steiner's life, recapitulates the chief premises of his approach to the "Jewish question": the purportedly closed nature of contemporary Jewry, the Jews' alleged lack of genuine spirituality, the notion of an obsolete Jewish national mission, the image of continued Jewish existence as a hindrance to the proper course of evolution, and the demand for a total disappearance of Jews as such. These unequivocal beliefs formed the cornerstone of Steiner's considered opinion on the "Jewish Question".

<sup>72</sup>Karl Heise, *Entente-Freimaurerei und Weltkrieg*, third edition, Basel 1920, p. 262; see also pp. 32–33, 84, 286, 296–297. In this edition, Steiner's foreword appears as an unsigned "Vorrede zur ersten Auflage" on the reverse of the table of contents. For extensive discussion of Heise and other early anthroposophists who disseminated this antisemitic conspiracy theory, see Armin Pfahl-Traughber, *Der Antisemitisch-Antifreimaurerische Verschwörungsmythos in der Weimarer Republik und im NS-Staat*, Vienna 1993.

<sup>73</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *Der innere Aspekt des sozialen Rätsels*, Dornach 1972, p. 56.

<sup>74</sup>*Idem*, "Vom Wesen des Judentums", p. 190. In the same lecture Steiner emphasised that "the Jews have always differentiated themselves from other people" and thereby "caused aversion and antipathy" towards themselves (p. 188). See also the special issue on the "Jewish question" of the major French anthroposophical journal, *La Science Spirituelle*, Spring 1928, particularly the contributions by Theodore Maurer, 'Problemes juifs' (pp. 381–387), and S. Rihouet, 'Jerusalem et Rome' (pp. 388–399).

## ANTINOMIES OF ASSIMILATION

In some respects, Steiner's ultimate position resembled that of well-known antisemites whose own stance was also tendentially pro-assimilationist, such as Heinrich von Treitschke, Adolf Stoecker, or Georges Vacher de Lapouge.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, his viewpoint shared significant assumptions with that of Treitschke's opponent in the Berlin dispute, Theodor Mommsen.<sup>76</sup> This raises an important interpretive challenge: whether to classify Steiner's mature statements about Jews as a variety of antisemitic discourse, or simply as an extraordinarily insensitive version of emphatically assimilationist philosemitism. Meeting this challenge requires nuanced scrutiny of the ideological and historical contexts within which Steiner operated, as well as the specific choices and alignments he made, throughout his career. Among these contextual factors one might include the following considerations, which may afford a framework for evaluating the basic conditions of antisemitic belief:

- 1) Steiner publicly praised prominent antagonists of the Jews and explicitly endorsed their views on Jewishness; 2) he vigorously defended anti-Jewish texts and their authors against the charge of antisemitism; 3) he derived his terminology and central concepts from sources in which anti-Jewish features played a significant role; 4) he expressed his own views on Jews and Judaism within pre-existing contexts in which anti-Jewish themes were already conspicuous; 5) he incorporated longstanding anti-Jewish tropes into his own doctrines; 6) his overall judgements on Jews and Jewishness were predominantly negative. In comparison, the position Mommsen adopted in the Berlin dispute was in nearly every instance more or less the opposite. While several of these factors, taken in isolation, could be compatible with a philosemitic stance, their combined and cumulative effect is firmly judeophobic.

Many anthroposophists nevertheless insist that Steiner's mature position could not have been antisemitic, since he was a consistent proponent of assimilation.<sup>77</sup> This argument confuses the profoundly contrary meanings of "assimilation" prevalent at

<sup>75</sup>For a discussion of these authors' pro-assimilationist antisemitism, see Paul Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction*, New York 1967, pp. 76–77; and Kurt Lenk, 'Der Antisemitismusstreit oder Antisemitismus der gebildeten Leute', in Hans Horch (ed.), *Judentum, Antisemitismus und europäische Kultur*, Tübingen 1988. On assimilationist antisemitism as a general phenomenon, see George Mosse, *Germans and Jews*, Detroit 1987, chapter 3; and Donald Niewyk, 'Solving the "Jewish Problem": Continuity and Change in German Antisemitism, 1871–1945', *LBI Year Book*, vol. 35 (1990), pp. 335–370.

<sup>76</sup>In the 1879–1881 "Berlin Antisemitismusstreit" or dispute over antisemitism, Heinrich von Treitschke had offered a qualified defense of antisemitism while Mommsen sharply criticised this accommodation to populist demagoguery. Like many gentile Liberals of the time, Mommsen viewed the complete absorption of Jews into Christian society as the best safeguard against antisemitic agitation. For a sophisticated analysis of the lacunae inherent in this stance, see Hans-Joachim Salecker, *Der Liberalismus und die Erfahrung der Differenz: Über die Bedingungen der Integration der Juden in Deutschland*, Münster 1999. Although Steiner never addressed the Berlin dispute directly, he was effusive in his praise for Treitschke as a pre-eminent representative of the German spirit; see, among numerous examples, Steiner's paeans to Treitschke during WWI in *Zeitgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, Dornach 1966, vol. 2, pp. 67–69, 108–118, and 245–247.

<sup>77</sup>For one of many examples see Hans-Jürgen Bader, Manfred Leist, and Lorenzo Ravagli, *Rassenideale sind der Niedergang der Menschheit: Anthroposophie und der Antisemitismusvorwurf*, Stuttgart 2002.

the time, and ignores the extensive efforts by pro-assimilationist Jews to clarify their own perspectives on Jewish identity within German society. That theme is a mainstay of the extensive scholarship on German Jewish life in the late Wilhelminian and early Weimar period.<sup>78</sup> Indeed it was precisely liberal Jews, those already assimilated into German society to a large extent, who rejected ultimately eliminationist stances like Steiner's most emphatically. Since such Jews "constituted the vast majority of German Jewry" during Steiner's lifetime,<sup>79</sup> his repeated admonitions against the ostensibly closed "spirit of Jewry" represent a thoroughgoing misapprehension of reality.

Steiner's own doctrines, in contrast to those of assimilationist Jews, belong to what a recent study of Gentile and Jewish assimilation discourse calls "the exclusivist assimilation model".<sup>80</sup> Whereas German Jews overwhelmingly understood assimilation to mean the retention of some sort of Jewish identity in tandem with increased integration into German society, Steiner demanded the abandonment of Jewishness itself. This was the case in all three of the phases examined here, including Steiner's philosemitic period; the firm insistence on an exclusivist ideal of assimilation provided a measure of coherence to his otherwise thoroughly ambivalent attitudes towards Jews. While fundamentally misunderstanding what assimilation meant to most of his Jewish peers, for the whole of his life Steiner continued to view Jewish identity itself as a particularistic throwback that somehow detracted from full humanity. Predicated as it was on a spiritual model of progressive evolution, his conception of the "universal human" yielded a false universalism that left no room for Jewish existence in contemporary society.

In this way, Steiner's esoteric teachings about the illegitimacy of Jewish life in the modern world, coupled with his portrayal of Jews as a distinct racial group, both contributed to and presupposed the basic premises of non-extremist antisemitism, the principal mode of antisemitic thinking before the rise of Nazism.

<sup>78</sup>Uriel Tal, for example, writes: "The spokesmen of the Jewish communities interpreted integration as a process that would enable them to retain some kind of separate identity as Jews without jeopardizing their full membership in the German nation. The Christians, however, understood Jewish integration as a process that would deprive Jewish identity, except for the Orthodox element, of all meaning or justification." *idem*, *Christians and Jews in Germany*, London 1975, p. 63. Steven Aschheim concurs: "Most Jews sought an acceptable combination of *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*, a way of defining Jewishness in terms of Germanness. Wherever possible the identity of the two was stressed." *idem*, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923*, Madison 1982, p. 227. On liberal German Jewry's simultaneous cultivation of Germanness and Jewishness see Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity*, New Haven 1999.

<sup>79</sup>Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany*, p. 220.

<sup>80</sup>Christian Wiese, *Wissenschaft des Judentums und protestantische Theologie im wilhelminischen Deutschland*, Tübingen 1999 (Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 61), p. 248. Wiese writes: "In every case we must precisely distinguish between the conception of assimilation shared by the dominant German majority culture, which aimed at the disappearance of Jewish identity, and the viewpoint of the Jewish minority, which sought to adopt the majority culture while preserving its own." (p. 46). Wiese's study explores the ways in which assimilationist German Jews in the late Wilhelminian era "critically disputed the exclusivist assimilation model of the non-Jewish majority, which strove for complete amalgamation, and proposed instead the concept of 'Germanness and Jewishness', which demanded equal rights to participation in the majority culture in conjunction with full preservation of Jewish identity". (p. 248).

The nature of Steiner's hostility to Jewishness was thus both ordinary and anomalous; it incorporated the common misconceptions of the era and simultaneously transcended these within the peculiar framework of "occult science". It was not so much hatred or fear of Jews that animated Steiner's mature antisemitism, but ignorance of contemporary Jewish life, of modern Jewish culture and history, as well as a myopic commitment to German spiritual superiority.<sup>81</sup> What Steiner did know about Judaism, moreover, was generally refracted through a Christian and Germanocentric lens.

These factors make Steiner a fascinating and sobering case study in the dynamics and dilemmas of assimilationist thinking in German-speaking Europe. Closer examination of his somewhat obscure theories about race and ethnicity, and the disconcerting implications of his polemics against "Jewry as such", can perhaps shed new light on more celebrated confrontations between Gentile and Jewish approaches to the "Jewish question". The case of Rudolf Steiner complicates standard conceptions of philosemitic and antisemitic discourse in the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras and calls for renewed attention to the dialectic of cultural and racial forms of antisemitic thinking during this intellectually turbulent time.

<sup>81</sup>In this context Shulamith Volkov's distinction between "anti-Semitism as an animus" and "anti-Semitism as an ideology" is apposite; see *idem*, 'Anti-Semitism as Explanation: For and Against', in Moische Postone and Eric Santner (eds.), *Catastrophe and Meaning*, Chicago 2003, pp. 34–48.