

BOOK REVIEW

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Are “1652s” the new Jews? A review of Milton Shain’s *A Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa, 1930–1948*

In this rigorously researched and readable account, Milton Shain documents the growth of anti-Semitism in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s. In this period, intense anti-Jewish prejudice spread from the margins of the radical right to the centre of public life.

A number of dark clouds gathered to produce the “perfect storm”. The socioeconomic atmosphere was already combustible after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that reverberated globally in its wake. A devastating drought wreaked havoc on the South African economy. It exacerbated the so-called “poor white” problem which, according to the Carnegie Commission’s report in 1932, beset one in five – mainly Afrikaner – whites.

Poverty, writes Shain, was the “furnace that fired extremism”. It enabled the proliferation of radical right movements that took their cue from fascists in Europe and Nazis in Germany. There was a rapid fungal spread: the South African Christian National Socialist Movement (or Greyshirts) was founded by Louis Weichardt in 1933, and soon there were Blackshirts, Brownshirts and Orangeshirts, too.

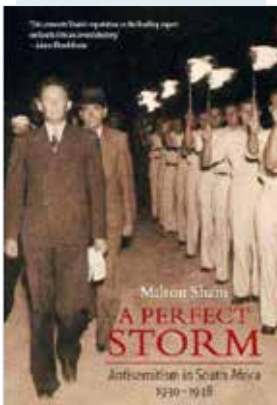
As “hapless victims of decades of structural change”, alienated, unskilled and marginalised ‘poor whites’ were an easy target for ethnic mobilisation. They constituted a “political time bomb” waiting to explode. And the “demagogic, simplistic and vulgar message” of Jew-hatred peddled by the likes of Weichardt lit the fuse.

Drawing on centuries of anti-Semitic stereotyping, the Shirtists cast an “alien”, “unassimilable” Jewry as an existential danger to Afrikaner spiritual unity and the South African polity.

At the same time, a völkisch Afrikaner Christian-Nationalism began to saturate the mainstream political climate. This was signalled by the breakaway formation of D.F. Malan’s ‘Purified’ National Party in 1934.

With the mercury rising, Jews – as so often throughout world history – were turned into a “problem”, scapegoated and victimised. The “Jewish Question” began to dominate public discourse.

Having gauged the political temperature, Malan’s Nationalists latched onto a populist cause. In 1930, Malan himself – in his capacity as Minister of the Interior



**A PERFECT STORM:
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AFRICA, 1930-1948**

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Milton Shain

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– had introduced the (hastily-enacted) Quota Bill, which aimed to halt eastern European Jewish immigration to South Africa.

In 1931, Malan went out of his way to tell Die Burger – the Nationalist mouthpiece of which he was a one-time editor – how easy it was to “rouse a feeling of hate towards the Jew”. After 1934, his new splinter party invested a great deal of time trying to do just that.

They drummed up and exploited discontent regarding the “Jewish Question”, and used it to try and marginalise Jews from public life. Shain notes that under pressure from the radical right, the ‘Purified’ National Party called for “programmatic action” against Jews.

Such calls went beyond tightened immigration controls. In the wake of the Stuttgart Affair, which saw 537 German-Jewish refugees arrive in South Africa aboard the German liner Stuttgart in 1936, anti-immigrant anger reached a fever pitch. The Aliens Act was passed in 1937 to stop the influx of German-Jewish refugees. It effectively precluded the immigration of Jews to South Africa. The Nationalists’ focus now shifted to quotas on Jewish commerce, professional activity and employment.

On the campaign trail in Kroonstad ahead of the 1938 general election, Malan invoked the names of diamond magnate Ernest Oppenheimer and industrialist Isidore Schlesinger to argue for the imposition of quotas on Jewish-owned businesses.

A few days later in Parys, he praised Mussolini and Hitler, and fulminated against the “overrepresentation” of Jews in trade and the legal profession.

Under the influence of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda, and drawing on anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist rhetoric, Malan’s Nationalists began to make an intellectual case for what today would be called “demographic representivity”. This was expounded most fully by the Dutch-born, German-trained, Stellenbosch academic-turned-politician, Hendrik Verwoerd.

Writing in Die Transvaler in 1937 on the “The Jewish Question from the National Party standpoint”, Verwoerd claimed that Jews were “hostile to the national aspirations of Afrikanerdom” and stood “in the way of the Afrikaner’s economic prosperity”.

He argued that legislation should “gradually but purposefully” be introduced to ensure that each section of the white population should, “as far as practicable, enjoy a share of each of the major occupations, according to its proportion of the white population”.

In this way, as Shain remarks, from the 1930s, the so-called “Jewish Question”, and attempts to resolve it, paralleled – “and to some extent even presaged” – the elaboration of apartheid ideology.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Jews helped to consolidate an “all-embracing Afrikaner identity” among nationalists. Anti-Semitism was used to paper over the cracks of class divisions and antagonisms in Afrikaner society.

For all that, the party of a broad and accommodating bilingual white “South Africanism”, the South African Party (subsequently United Party) was, if not swept up by, then certainly carried in part by, the prevailing current of anti-Semitism. After all, despite the fact that it was supported by Jewish voters, both the Quota Act and

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Aliens Act were promulgated on its watch. Jan Hofmeyr, the great misplaced hope of South African liberals, would only countenance Jewish immigration if it was part of a wider immigration stream of the “stock of people from whom we have sprung”.

Among the most virulent anti-Semites were English-speaking South Africans. One of the more odious characters in Shain’s study (in a field with stiff competition) is one Kerr Wylie, a Professor of Law at the University of Cape Town. He edited a fascist propaganda-sheet, the bilingual *Die Waarheid/ The Truth*. Kerr, a conspiracist of note, believed that Jews were “at the bottom of all the evils” afflicting South Africa and that “organised Jewry is the leading agent of the Devil on earth”.

However, as Shain acknowledges, “at no time during these years did anti-Jewish discourse in South Africa approximate the language of exclusion and frenzy heard in some European countries”.

Even Patrick Duncan, the soon-to-be Governor-General, complained to Lady Selborne in 1935 about the “throng” of Jewish holidaymakers at Muizenberg. Like a Penny Sparrow *avant la lettre*, he wrote: “I am not anti-Semitic. I have many Jewish friends whom I like and admire. But something in me revolts against our country being peopled by the squat-bodied, furtive-eyed, loud-voiced race which crowds Muizenberg from the upcountry trading stores”.

Shain writes that the “alien Jew challenged an emerging sense of ‘South Africanness’ among English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites”. Yet there is not much evidence to suggest (not that Shain quite makes the claim) that the consolidation of an inclusive Anglo-Afrikaner identity was driven by a shared anti-Semitism.

There is no doubt that the “Jewish Question” played a critical role in South African politics during the 1930s and 1940s. However, as Shain acknowledges, “at no time during these years did anti-Jewish discourse in South Africa approximate the language of exclusion and frenzy heard in some European countries”.

Indeed, Jewish South Africans flourished in many areas of public life during these two decades. Morris Kentridge was a voice of reason in Parliament, reminding South Africans that “racialism, illiberalism and economic depression have always proved fertile soil for anti-Semitism”.

Curiously, with the exception of Morris Alexander, other contemporary Jewish MPs like Henry Gluckman play a marginal role in Shain’s book, while others – like Max Sonnenberg and Bertha Solomon – seem not to feature at all.

South African Jews were also active in student politics. Many of the most prominent leftists in the National Union of South African Students in the 1940s were Jewish: figures like Brian Bunting and Ruvin Bennun.

And during the Second World War, Jewish volunteers like Jock Isacowitz, Jack Hodgson, Roley Arenstein and Joe Podbrey played a key role in the Springbok Legion, a soldiers’ organisation whose members returned to South Africa radicalised by the fight against fascism.

It would have been interesting to learn how they engaged in, challenged and refashioned the polemical arena in which anti-Semitism seemed to thrive back home.

Yet, as early as 1943, as Shain remarks, the “Jewish Question” had “lost much of its electoral traction”. Once the war was over, and the (now) ‘Reunited’ National Party came to power in 1948, Malan turned his back completely on the “Jewish Question”.

As the economy recovered and Afrikaners became more upwardly mobile, the need for a Jewish bogeyman disappeared. The wily opportunist, Malan, switched from demonising Jews as “unassimilable” to holding them up as a model of survival for Afrikaners to emulate.

Shain’s book documents in rich detail the rise of South African anti-Semitism during a critical period. As such, it makes a significant contribution to a broader body of international scholarship on anti-Semitism, but it also throws a new light on the domestic politics of the 1930s and 1940s.

The parallels with South Africa today are too obvious to ignore. Some 80 to 90 years on, we are once more a country in economic decline, mired in poverty, wracked by drought, in the grip of political turmoil, and witness to a resurgence of racial nativism.

Seized with a grandiose but ill-defined project to “decolonise” institutions, these student demagogues view “whiteness” (an incoherent notion) as an existential threat; an impurity that has to be “countered”, “abolished” and even “burned”.

Latter-day fascists stalk our university campuses propelled, in Tony Leon’s words, by a populist fury against whites. Seized with a grandiose but ill-defined project to “decolonise” institutions, these student demagogues view “whiteness” (an incoherent notion) as an existential threat; an impurity that has to be “countered”, “abolished” and even “burned”. They are chauvinists who reject any kind of cultural cross-pollination as a form of “appropriation”. In fact, opposition to “whiteness” now performs a similar function to anti-Semitism among Afrikaners in the 1930s and 1940s. It is being used to construct a monolithic group identity and deflect attention from socio-economic cleavages among black South Africans.

Jew-baiting has made its return. Last year, the former President of the Student Representative Council (SRC) at Wits University, Mcebo Dlamini, declared his love for Adolf Hitler. He said, “[w]hat I love about Hitler is his charisma and his capabilities to organise people. We need more leaders of such calibre. I love Adolf Hitler”. A few months later, the SRC President at the Durban University of Technology, Mqondisi Duma, demanded that his Council expel from the university all Jews who would not publicly declare their loyalty to the Palestinian cause.

These student fascists are aided and abetted by an insurgent black middle-class intelligentsia, riding the bandwagon of racial populism (the Piet Meyers, Nico Diedrichses and – dare it be said – Hendrik Verwoerds of their time).

Trapped in a binary, essentialist cast of mind – where black pain and victimhood square off against white domination and privilege – their discourse has already moved from a regressive leftist fringe to the centre of politics. They view whites as aliens, or “1652s” in their jarring parlance; predatory immigrants who might, ultimately, be unassimilable into their new world order.

As Helen Suzman Foundation Research Fellow, Aubrey Matshiqi, recently observed, when countries, organisations and institutions feel under siege and are incapable of resolving their problems, then “finding ‘Jews’ to blame becomes a strategic option”.

If Shain’s book holds a lesson in store for us, it is that we should never lose sight of the real problems, never stop searching for alternative solutions, and never succumb – as the United Party did – to a lazy accommodation with the prevailing orthodoxy. That way storm clouds lie, ready to erupt.