

Book Review

Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Antisemitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present

Milton Shain

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Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Antisemitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present is Milton Shain's third instalment on exposing anti-Semitism in South Africa. His earlier works – *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa*⁸⁴³ and *A Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa 1930–1948*⁸⁴⁴ – provide a solid foundation from which he launches his latest book. These books can be read either individually or as a compelling collection.

In *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists*, Shain departs from the strict chronological narrative preferred by historians. Instead, he provides the reader with easier to read “essay-like” chapters, which follow key themes within a loose chronology. Shain thereby navigates the reader between different manifestations of anti-Semitism in both context and form.

The first chapter commences in 1948, with the accession of the National Party to power under the leadership of Dr Daniel Francois (DF) Malan. During the Second World War (1939–1945), the Afrikaner Nationalists often found themselves as fellow travellers of predominantly right-wing radical – if not fascist – groupings. Prior to and during this war, Malan often employed anti-Semitism and *geldmag* (big business) arguments to attract support and voters from these circles.⁸⁴⁵ After the war, Malan, having no further use for anti-Semitism rhetoric, and sensing its utilisation counter-productive, quickly reached a *modus vivendi* with the Jewish community. Malan's reconstruction of the Jew as a conspiratorial enemy of the *volk* along ideological lines discarded the direct reference to “Semitic” or racial characteristics. Liberalism and communism were now framed as the new enemy of the national and cultural identity of the *Afrikaner-volk*, and the handmaiden of the ‘one world nation’.⁸⁴⁶ Many Afrikaner nationalists however still associated Jews with both liberalism and communism. Such sleight of hand accommodated the conspiratorial world view of nationalist supporters in plain sight, but without the international stigma of fascism or overt support for the holocaust. Despite this, a residual flotsam of national socialism of the Second World War persisted in providing oxygen to anti-Semitism in South Africa.

In Chapter two, Shain discusses those that persisted in placing the Jewish conspiracy central to their world view, and reflects on the extreme fringes of South African anti-Semitism by focusing on the more prolific pamphleteers of the age. Two such pamphleteers, Ray Rudman and Johan Schoeman, are singled out as conduits for the influx of international anti-Semitic material. Despite their efforts, their influence was limited to keeping ‘alive a world of anti-Jewish conspiracy’ in South Africa.⁸⁴⁷ The journalists, Sydney Brown, of the *South African Observer*, and Ivor Benson, the discredited chief assistant editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, are however treated with more concern. In the 1960s, Brown, through the *South African Observer*, posited the Jewish state and Zionism within the understanding of Jewish power, thereby widening the scope of anti-Semitism beyond the “internationalist” rhetoric.⁸⁴⁸ This framing would place Brown in conflict with the Vorster government. Benson, with a list of credible appointments as a journalist behind him, took up Brown’s mantle in the 1970s. The work of such pamphleteers and journalists on the fringes of public opinion provided not only a constant flow of material to the radical right but also space for holocaust denial, and Nazi memory reconstruction.

Chapter three covers the later years of National Party rule during the 1970s and 1980s, when ideological schism within the party created fertile ground for the weeds of anti-Semitism to grow between the cracks. The blossoming relationship of the Vorster government with Israel dampened the nationalist anti-Semitic discourse, allowing the Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP) and Conservative Party (KP) to sporadically resuscitate the nationalist anti-Semitic discourse with varied levels of success. As the National Party right wing continued to fragment, smaller groups emerged – each jockeying to be more Christian and more *volk-ish* than the next. This inward-looking world view often cast the Jew as a convenient internationalist enemy of the *volk*. During this time, the right-wing *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB) provided the bridge between propaganda and political action. By “propaganda of the deed”, Eugène Terre’Blanche, leader of the AWB, was able to set the outer bounds to which the parliamentary right could respectably express their anti-Semitism and holocaust denialism.⁸⁴⁹ In 1979, the secretary-general of the HNP, Louis Stofberg, allowed the chairman of the anti-Semitic National Front, Mr Ray Hill, to hijack an HNP platform to launch an anti-Semitic rant. Advocate Martin Louw, son of Eric Louw, the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1955 to 1963, immediately resigned from the HNP in protest.⁸⁵⁰ By 1982, Terre’Blanche had elevated the Jewish question sufficiently for Dr Andries Treurnicht of the KP to disavow any association with the AWB. Although the KP would allow Jewish members, Treurnicht remained sceptical of the extent of the holocaust;⁸⁵¹ however the HNP did not see any need to disassociate with anti-Semitism. In 1987, Stofberg allowed the Reverend Steenkamp, a former minister of the Dutch Reformed Church to deliver a shocking address at an HNP meeting in Bloemfontein, where Steenkamp told the meeting ‘die jode is ’n vervloekte volk’ (the Jews are a cursed nation).⁸⁵²

The antics of the AWB and Terre’Blanche showed how far the Afrikaner right could be radicalised. South Africa however prepared for a more inclusive democratic order: the AWB, and with it, the radical right gradually lost traction. By the later 1980s, the political utility of anti-Semitism waned in the light of the growing reality of black rule. Chapter four traces how anti-Semitism re-emerged within the framework of a multinational

democracy. Ironically, the Israeli state, the very entity that dampened Afrikaner nationalist anti-Semitism, provided the spark for the framing of anti-Semitism in the new South Africa. The proximity of the African National Congress (ANC) with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and communist internationalism informed the emerging vocabulary and agitation of radical activists. The close relationship between Israel and the United States of America and violent reaction to Palestinian (Muslim) nationhood provided a comfortable and convenient target for emerging activists. “Jewish wealth” and conspiratorial world order were easy to rework for a new populist agenda.⁸⁵³ Even though the new discourse in South Africa was careful not to link Zionism and Jewry, the subtext remained readily discernible. Yet, Milton Shain takes care in the preface to the book to differentiate between “ideational” and “programmatically” anti-Semitism, which foreshadows his disinclination to label anti-Zionist discourse and propaganda as anti-Semitic.⁸⁵⁴

Shain, as a historian, further resists the temptation to theorise or generalise beyond his objective of discussing anti-Semitism in South Africa. He could however not escape the inevitable description of a wider eco-system of conspiracy theories in the country. Herein lies the value of the book for military readers interested in the underlying dynamics of disinformation, misinformation, and information warfare. Throughout the book, anti-Semitism is couched in terms of conspiracy, world order, and populist agitation.

Wider reading on anti-Semitism could assist the reader to contextualise Shain’s work. For instance, Stephen Eric Bronner powerfully places anti-Semitism at the centre of the conspiratorial mind-set in an article titled ‘Conspiracy Fetishism, Community, and the Antisemitic Imaginary’.⁸⁵⁵ He underlines Shain’s observations that anti-Semitism rarely travels alone and is nested within other prejudices.⁸⁵⁶ Such nesting of prejudices allows for a broad theorisation and generalisation of Shain’s key observations. Any group can be cast as the “other” within the conspiratorial mind-set. Shain’s trilogy not only debunks the myths of anti-Semitism within the South African context, but also provides a detailed description on how anti-Semitism has been mobilised and weaponised across time and context. Such weaponisation of hatred provides easy answers to difficult questions, sedates the mind of the lazy, and subverts societal activism. A careful reading could provide an astute student with a clear example of how bigotry has been deployed by populist leaders to attempt to subvert South African society and democracy.

Graeme Plint 

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Endnotes

- ⁸⁴³ M Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994).
- ⁸⁴⁴ M Shain, *A Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa 1930–1948* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015).
- ⁸⁴⁵ Shain, *A Perfect Storm*, 172–173.
- ⁸⁴⁶ M Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Antisemitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2023), 19.
- ⁸⁴⁷ Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists*, 63.
- ⁸⁴⁸ Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists*, 48, 94.
- ⁸⁴⁹ Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists*, 106–108.
- ⁸⁵⁰ J le May, ‘Eric Louw’s Son Disgusted by ‘Insult to Jewish Boys’: Top Herstigte Resigns over Link with NF’, *Sunday Express*, 11 March 1979, 10.
- ⁸⁵¹ Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists*, 101; *Die Afrikaner*, ‘Joodse Herrie in Politiek’, 21 April 1982, 4; *Buurman*, ‘Die KP, die AWB en die Jode’, 13, 4 (1983), 8.
- ⁸⁵² *Die Volksblad*, ‘Skokkende Uitsprake by Opening van HNP’s’, 23 January 1987, 1.
- ⁸⁵³ Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists*, 132; P Trewhele, ‘Insight: The ANC and Anti-Semitism’, *Daily Dispatch*, 30 June 2009, 8.
- ⁸⁵⁴ Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists*, 153.
- ⁸⁵⁵ SE Bronner, ‘Conspiracy Fetishism, Community, and the Antisemitic Imaginary’, *Antisemitism Studies*, 4, 2 (2020), 371-387.
- ⁸⁵⁶ Bronner, *Conspiracy Fetishism*, 375.