

Jewish Historical Studies
A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry

Article:

Response to Shirli Gilbert

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How to cite: Hodes, R. 'Response to Shirli Gilbert'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2023, 55(1), pp. 226–229. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2024v55.12>.

Published: 12 January 2024

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

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Response to Shirli Gilbert

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In her article “Scholarship on South African Jews: state of the field”, Shirli Gilbert offers a sweeping yet meticulous account of scholarship on South African Jews beginning on 9 July 1905 when Dr. Joseph Herman Hertz, the Rabbi of the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Synagogue, gave a keynote address to the first Zionist Conference held in Johannesburg urging Jews to write their own history. Much of Jewish history in South Africa is bound up in histories of Zionist sympathy and support. In the late nineteenth century, the age of the new imperialism during which European global empires were at their zenith, Hertz encouraged Jews to consider their roles as “discoverer and pioneer” in the South African colonies. In current scholarship, with its focus on decolonization and subalterity, an exploration of these roles would be likely to attract censure rather than celebration. Indeed, Jewish historiography from the early twentieth century to the present echoes the contours of the discipline of history more broadly, with so-called empirical accounts told in the tone of “his master’s voice” gradually replaced by a move towards history from below, that is, eschewing Whiggish versions of history as the product and representation of great men and grand events.

In her review, Gilbert does not shy away from some of the more controversial moments in Jewish historiography in recent years, including an account about the planning and later rescinding of an article about Jewish complicity in apartheid in a special issue of *Jewish Affairs* (the official publication of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies). Indeed, Gilbert asserts that most of the history written by South African Jews has been affiliated with the structures of community leadership, and has tended to follow official narratives, initially of Jewish neutrality regarding apartheid, and later a celebration of Jewish resistance to apartheid. But while it is true that the majority of anti-apartheid activists working within the fold of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party were indeed Jewish, many eschewed their Judaism, inhabiting secular or atheist positions (Joe Slovo, the highest ranking

“white” member of the ANC who served as the head of the ANC’s military wing, Umkhonto weSizwe, is one example of this).

Gilbert writes of the “thorny relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism” as “perhaps the most troubling issue” for the contemporary community. But she refrains from further detail of this struggle, opting instead for a more even-keeled account of Jewish life in South Africa, including its variegated politics.

Gilbert notes a number of surveys conducted under the auspices of the Board of Deputies, exploring the constitution of the community. Less attention is paid to the community’s politics. In the late 1950s until the late 1960s, most Jews voted for the Liberal Party, rather than the Progressive Party, and Colin Eglin (the Progressive Party’s candidate for Sea Point and Camps Bay, suburbs in which the majority of Cape Town Jews lived) remained a member of the Kelvin Grove sports club, which did not admit Jews during that time. Similar bans were in place at the Durban Country Club. Gilbert writes about antisemitism in South Africa during these decades, although her focus is on Afrikaners, rather than English-speaking South Africans, some of whom subscribed to virulent forms of antisemitism and anti-Jewish exclusion.

In describing the place of Jews in the apartheid state, Gilbert notes the work of the distinguished historian Phyllis Lewsen, who wrote that the majority of South African Jews supported segregation and had a strong antipathy to “non-Europeans”, that is, Coloured, Indian, and Black South Africans. Gilbert also notes that the historiography of Jews in South Africa has not always focused on Jews as “respectable” and “civic-minded”, but has at times acknowledged the “less salubrious” and even “delinquent” elements of Jewish society. This is particularly the case in the writings of Leybl Feldman and Charles van Onselen. Regarding the works of Feldman, Gilbert notes that the inability of historians to read Yiddish has seriously curtailed their comprehension of the Jewish past, with the notable exceptions of Sherman and Veronica Belling, whose fluency in Yiddish has infused their excellent interpretations of the roles of Jews in South African society.

Far from being a homogenous group, Gilbert writes of the work of Riva Krut, who eschewed homogeneity and instead emphasized differences between Jews across the lines of class, ethnicity, and language. The Board of Deputies was tasked with smoothing over these differences, providing leadership, welfare, and even internal policing of the Jewish community

during the many decades of its existence. Its role was also to maintain neutrality in the face of political opposition to the apartheid state's racial policies. Gilbert writes of the serious "dilemmas of conscience" which plagued the Jewish community throughout the apartheid era, but ultimately, quoting Gideon Shimoni, that mainstream communal leadership "steered away as far as it could from any engagement whatsoever with the political struggle against the government's apartheid programme". Gilbert's deft handling of the politics of Jewish responses to apartheid is one of the key strengths of her review. Another is her inclusion of histories that focus not only on prominent men and formal community structures, but also on women and on the domestic and private, rather than public, spheres.

Gilbert acknowledges that post-apartheid communal narratives have foregrounded Jewish opposition to apartheid, despite the reality that most Jews simply went along with apartheid's racial policies. Those who actively opposed apartheid were often ostracized by the community establishment, which feared a resurgence of antisemitism should communal leadership take an explicitly anti-apartheid position. The complicity of Jews with the apartheid state, which sought to smooth over earlier fissures in which Afrikaner politicians espoused open antisemitism (particularly during the 1930s), remains among the most difficult of subjects to tackle.

In her description of the prospective future of South African Jewish historiography, Gilbert notes that there is much to learn about the notions of religion and identity. In the demise of apartheid, Gilbert sees an opportunity to explore how ordinary Jews have responded to their circumstances, and how they have understood themselves as a community. She also sees an opportunity, following historians in the 1980s and 1990s, for scholarship on Jews' roles in the creation of the South African economy, particularly consumer culture. Overall Gilbert's analysis provides a springboard for engaging with Jewish historiography from the beginning of the community's emergence and in all its many guises.

South African historiography is constantly broadening and diversifying, as is evident in journals such as the *South African Historical Journal* and *Historia*. Histories of Jews written for, from, and by solely Jewish audiences threaten further to ghettoize the discipline, in ways resisted by key historians such as Charles van Onselen. Publishing in diverse forums is one of the ways that historians may ensure their work is received by a

wider audience. This is key as South African historiography has a renewed focus on the politics of race and identity, in the wake of the Fees Must Fall protests and the demands for curricula transformation at numerous universities in 2015 and 2016. Situating Jewish scholarship within the broader realms of local and global historiography offers the valuable opportunity to explore themes in relation not just to South African Jewish studies, but to international scholarship in the humanities. This is essential if South African Jewish historiography is to continue to grow and deepen in emerging and exciting intellectual domains.