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Review:

Zwischen Antisemitismus und Apartheid: Jüdinnen und Juden in Südafrika (1948–1990), Hanno Plass

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Zwischen Antisemitismus und Apartheid: Jüdinnen und Juden in Südafrika (1948–1990), Hanno Plass (Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2020), ISBN 9783957324320, pp. 553, € 24.00.

This book by Hanno Plass is the published version of his doctoral dissertation, defended in 2017 at the Technical University Berlin. The title suggests a general study of Jews in South Africa during the apartheid period. However, the book has a narrow subject: it focuses on a small but influential group of Jewish communist activists against apartheid, among others Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Denis Goldberg, and Rica Hodgson. Thanks to activists such as these, the disproportionately high engagement of Jewish South Africans in the struggle against apartheid is commonly acknowledged (p. 16). Plass sets out to study whether it was in fact the Jewish background or a shared Jewish experience that motivated the activists' resistance. He complements that with two additional research questions: whether contact between the "races" was part of the radical praxis of the resistance movement, creating a shared milieu against the very essence of apartheid ideology, as well as a utopia for a future egalitarian and democratic society; and whether the distinct character of this group persisted in exile and after the transition (1990–94). He has the refreshing honesty to admit that his work is motivated by an "entirely unscientific identification with and admiration for" the political work of his subjects (p. 44).

The book can be described as a collective biography of roughly twenty South African Jewish protagonists in the struggle against apartheid, who were for the most part also part of the South African Communist Party (SACP). The sources Plass uses are mainly biographies and biographical interviews, either already published or conducted by himself. These are complemented with records of the SACP, which are highly fragmentary and scattered across individual collections in various South African archives, and sources from the Anti-Apartheid Movement records in Oxford. The collective and biographical approach is the biggest strength of the book as it sheds light on the inner workings and individual motivations of the SACP as a party and its part in the resistance movement against apartheid. The personal tone is an interesting addition to the existing and ample literature on South African Jewry. However, it also comes with a certain risk: sometimes Plass follows the interpretations

and narratives that the historical actors use in their autobiographical accounts to explain and make sense of their experiences, instead of critically analysing why they might use specifically these narratives and where they might not add up with the historical events. A constructivist theoretical framework could have been helpful as a methodological foothold.

The analytical part of the book is divided into four main sections that differ considerably in length. The first is a detailed account of the historical background of both the Jewish community in South Africa, especially its relation to South African society and antisemitism, and the development of the apartheid system and the resistance against it until the early 1960s.

The second section (200 pages) is by far the longest. Under the title “Resistance – Flight – Exile”, and closely following the protagonists mentioned earlier, it chronicles the fight against apartheid from 1948 to 1964 when the resistance movement inside South Africa was crushed. After the Rivonia Trial of 1963–64, its protagonists either left the country or were imprisoned with life sentences. In the second half of this part, Plass analyses both the various strategies for emigration as well as everyday life in prison, both times focusing on the influence of the Jewishness of his protagonists. With this approach, he offers valuable insight into seemingly mundane aspects of the struggle, like family dynamics, the role of Jewish leftist networks, and of religious authorities and organizations. These enrich the existing literature because they link personal stories to bigger political and social developments. This also holds true for the next section on exile in London. The existing networks formed between the activists during the years of illegality in South Africa, as well as their shared cultural and political background, provided valuable assistance for refugees, especially during the early years after emigration. They formed a special subgroup in London that defined itself by its political character and Jewish background but was not Jewish in character (p. 232). The following years in the protagonists’ life were dominated by their continued political work in the African National Congress (ANC) and Anti-Apartheid Movement, as well as individual career paths and slow integration into English society. Both led to conflicts inside the group, too. In this section, Plass gives ample space to the female experience, of for example Norma Kitson and her City of London Anti-Apartheid Group, founded because she felt pushed to the margins of the exile milieu.

The third section analyses the complex social processes in which the activists located themselves between Jewishness and communism. Plass is able to show that many in fact shared a background that was in various ways connected to their Jewishness, even though most activists did not see it as the most important or decisive part of their identity. As Jews in South Africa, they were both privileged as white and confronted with exclusion and antisemitism by other white South Africans. The Second World War and the Holocaust had made antifascism a central part of self-identification. Hence, the Eastern European Jewish tradition that saw communism as a road to liberation, to an egalitarian society, appealed to them, Plass argues. Here, he also studies the role of race and ethnicity for the activists in more detail. Political activism did indeed create a more racially inclusive milieu across so-called “colour lines”, but within limits. The presence of white activists, private contacts, and friendships had some influence on the political decision to choose non-racialism over black nationalism among black activists.

The last section sheds light on the role of Jewish communist activists after the transition to democracy of 1990–94. While some returned to South Africa and helped to restructure the country politically under the leadership of the ANC, many others stayed in Great Britain, their home for thirty years. By including these different experiences, Plass does something many migration scholars do not: he is able to show how varied and difficult the process of return can be.

In his book, Hanno Plass shows that there were certain shared biographical aspects that shaped the political outlook of this group of anti-apartheid activists. Some of those were indeed linked to their Jewish cultural background and the resulting position in South African society, although there is no causal link between Jewishness and activism. He has written a readable and detailed book, that in some sections could have benefited from a little streamlining, especially in the first analytical chapter and the one on historical background. The analysis would also have profited from a more solid theoretical framework and a clearer sociological and less political definition of certain terms such as Jewishness or identity. For example, Plass simply presupposes a link between Jewishness and political leftism and constantly measures his subjects against it, whereas a more open-ended research question might have been more productive. However, the book adds a new biographical approach to the existing literature, and is hence interesting for those

studying South African Jewry in the second half of the twentieth century, global communism, resistance movements, and questions of identity.

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