

Jewish Historical Studies
A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry

Review:

Jewish Antifascism and the False Promise of Settler Colonialism,
Max Kaiser

Jonathan Hyslop^{1,*}

How to cite: Hyslop, J. 'Jewish Antifascism and the False Promise of Settler Colonialism, Max Kaiser'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2023, 55(1), pp. 330–334. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2024v55.25>.

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.

Copyright:

© 2023, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2024v55.25>.

Open Access:

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

*Correspondence: jhslop@colgate.edu
¹Colgate University, USA

Jewish Antifascism and the False Promise of Settler Colonialism, Max Kaiser (Springer International Publishing, 2022), ISBN 9783031101229, pp. 302, \$129.99.

Recent years have seen the development of an extensive new literature on the subject of antifascism. Emphasizing antifascist movements' historical importance not only in the period from the 1920s to the Second World War but also to the present, this body of work has highlighted the great political diversity of the forms that antifascist ideologies have taken. In this context, Max Kaiser's study of Jewish antifascism in Australia during the 1940s and early 1950s is a valuable contribution in mapping one significant, and remarkably creative, strand of antifascist thought and action.

Kaiser's focus is on an organization known as the Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism (*sic*; hereafter, JC), founded in Melbourne in 1942, and their magazine *Unity*. He also considers the work and activism of other groupings and individuals in the broader milieu of the organization. The author's key argument is that the JC produced a dynamic politics, which rejected assimilationism. Instead, it favoured a Jewish identification that combined a central commitment to fighting antisemitism with alliances to non-Jewish progressive social movements. The JC stood for a deepening of Jewish consciousness, and the formation of a Jewish political subjectivity, aimed not at becoming part of Australian society or towards the newly formed Jewish state, but rather towards a global politics of solidarity. The organization had important connections with leftist Jewish movements internationally, especially in the U.K. and the U.S., but also saw itself as an ally of broader Australian and international egalitarian and anti-colonial causes.

The JC was enormously productive in the cultural sphere and also relentlessly politically active. Its most important political campaign was mounted in opposition to a plan by the Australian government, in the early 1950s, for German immigration. JC activists contended that the policy did not recognize the continuing threat of fascism and the inadequate de-Nazification of German society. They helped motivate a broad movement on the issue led by the leftist Australian Labor Party leader, H. V. Evatt, which in the end did not stop the policy, but resulted in it being somewhat restricted.

Kaiser's reading of the cultural work and political texts of the JC

world is sensitive and intelligent. He makes an interesting argument that they were willing to dwell on the experience of the Holocaust in a way that assimilationists and Zionists, with their strong future-oriented ideologies, were not. In postwar Australia, antisemitism remained at high levels, and the JC writers and activists, therefore, saw the Holocaust as speaking directly to the present, and fascism as posing an ongoing threat. As Kaiser shows, authors in *Unity* frequently linked the Holocaust to historical and contemporary forms of colonialism and racism across the world. For him, they interpreted the Holocaust as a form of racist genocide, and this view opened the way to identification with other oppressed groups. This approach was accompanied by a strong anti-assimilationist attitude which was particularly manifested in a celebration of Yiddish literature; a number of people in the JC milieu promoted Yiddish writing as an expression of Jewish identity, although English was the group's main working language.

The most original aspect of the book, though, is Kaiser's framing of Jewish antifascism in the context of settler colonialism. The radicalism of the JC came up against the constraints of the Australian social order, with its white pseudo-egalitarianism. To some extent it succumbed to the lures of this ideology; ideas of a unique national "mateship" have after all been powerful and central in Australian popular leftism. But the JC also, in part, kicked against these notions: some key JC activists and cultural figures showed a strong awareness of the oppression of Australian Aboriginals and colonialism more broadly, and supported the Aboriginal political movements that erupted in the 1940s. In this regard, Kaiser has a particularly good discussion of the two figures from the Jewish antifascist milieu who had the biggest impact on Australian culture, the writer Judah Waten and the painter Yosl Bergner. Waten, who became nationally known in the 1950s, introduced the contemporary Aboriginal experience into his work, in contrast to the more elegiac depictions of Aboriginals by earlier Australian progressive writers. Bergner, who left Poland in 1937 and lived in Australia from then until 1948, painted two series of powerful works, one depicting Aboriginal life and the other about the Holocaust, thereby creating the ground for complex reflection on oppression and genocide.

Kaiser's work has important implications for thinking about the interface between settler colonialism and antifascism. Ideologies of antifascism achieved strong appeal for white populations in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, and the United States in the late 1930s

and 1940s. Yet in these movements, a broad progressivism was often achieved by a deliberate downplaying of issues of racism and colonialism. Perhaps the ultimate example was in South Africa, where during the Second World War, the Communist Party gained a mass following for an “antifascist” white servicemen’s organization, the Springbok Legion, but never was able to translate that into a challenge to the segregationist racial order. Antifascism could, in certain contexts, be compatible with structural racism. Kaiser adds another complexity to the picture: he sees Zionism as primarily a form of settler colonialism. Thus, in a settler colony like Australia, the local experience became something of a lens for reading what was happening in the Middle East, with the temptation to transfer tropes of settler self-reliance between the two contexts. The JC was initially pro-Israel, seeing the formation of the new state as a blow against British colonialism (although its approach was also influenced by aspirations for Arab-Jewish unity or cooperation). After 1948, the JC seems to have lost enthusiasm for the Israeli cause, but never became really critical of the new state either. Kaiser’s work is potentially an important stimulus to comparative analysis of the way in which antifascist ideologies were shaped by the specificities of settler colonial societies.

Kaiser could have done more in terms of scene-setting at the start of the book. The non-Australian reader needs more help in the way of introductory political background than is given here. But even for the specialist, the author should have said more at the beginning about the social and political background of the JC activists. There are interesting snippets about this scattered throughout the book, but we never get an overview of the occupations, life courses, and political trajectories of the group as a whole. This is not, of course, to advocate a simplistic “reading off” the ideology of the activists from their social origins. But Kaiser’s able interpretations of their texts would have been enriched by a deeper picture of their authors’ contexts.

Perhaps the least satisfactory aspect of the book is Kaiser’s handling of the JC milieu’s relation to the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). A few of the JC’s leading figures were communists, and this was frequently, and often unfairly, used to attack them by opponents inside the Jewish community and beyond. Kaiser certainly makes a convincing and powerful case that the JC produced genuinely new and independent ideas, and was by no means a “communist front” organization. But as he himself acknowledges, *Unity* was “stridently pro-

Soviet” (p. 86), and it is clear that JC policies on many political issues were congruent with those of the CPA. The JC, after the Cold War fully erupted in 1947, appear to have viewed the world in terms that saw the unified forces of progress around the Soviet Union on one side, confronting the forces of reaction on the other. Kaiser might have presented this cosmology more critically. He does not, for example, seem to question the JC’s general acceptance of the Soviet and Chinese view of the Korean War, its reading of the Soviet Union as the paragon of anti-colonialism and peace movements, and its tendency to present the new West Germany as a revived fascist state. These positions, while arguably understandable in their time, are all, to say the least, questionable in terms of subsequent historical research. How the JC arrived at them might have been more closely explored.

Kaiser also could have confronted more directly the issue of why the JC was not prepared to recognize or address the issue of antisemitism in the U.S.S.R. He does describe the rise of antisemitism in the late Stalin era, and the murder, by the dictator, of Solomon Mikhoels and other Soviet Jewish leaders who had played key roles in the global wartime support for the U.S.S.R. He mentions the antisemitic “Doctor’s Plot” conspiracy theory cooked up by Stalin at the end of his life. Yet he does not really ask why the JC did not baulk at all this. Moreover, Kaiser seems slightly dismissive of the anti-Stalinist Jewish Bund socialist refugees who interacted with the JC. The Bundist activists tended to be recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, with direct experience of Soviet repression. The JC’s view of the Bundists as simply reactionary now seems indefensible. The book also makes no mention of the widely publicized antisemitic Slansky trial of former communist leaders in Czechoslovakia in 1952, or other similar Eastern European Stalinist show trials in that period, or of any reaction by the JC to those events.

It is of course true that the 1949 Menzies government, and the right wing of the Australian Labor Party, did exploit anti-Soviet sentiment for a campaign against the communists and the left more broadly. And it is the case that Soviet policy in relation to the Jewish world was complex, with initial support by the U.S.S.R. for Israel’s independence in 1948 subsequently shifting to hostility. But none of this can justify the ignoring of Stalinist violence and antisemitism by the JC. By the early 1950s, there was a considerable amount of information available about Soviet repression, especially from the Kravchenko and Rousset libel trials in

France, which internationally popularized knowledge of the existence of the Gulag. This makes the ability of the JC activists to resist asking questions all the more remarkable.

Despite these criticisms, Kaiser's book is to be commended for its intensive and wide-ranging research, its astute and nuanced readings of literary and political texts, and for its bold attempt to theorize the relationship between antifascism and settler colonialism. It points to important potential new directions for antifascist studies.

Jonathan Hyslop
Colgate University, Hamilton, NY; University of Pretoria