

Jewish Historical Studies
A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry

Article:

Response to Shirli Gilbert

Antony Polonsky^{1,*}

How to cite: Polonsky, A. 'Response to Shirli Gilbert'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2023, 55(1), pp. 219–221. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2024v55.10>.

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.2024v55.10>.

Open Access:

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

*Correspondence: polonsky@brandeis.edu

¹Brandeis University, USA

Response to Shirli Gilbert

ANTONY POLONSKY

I read with great interest Shirli Gilbert's comprehensive account of the present state of South African Jewish historiography. My comments are inevitably those of an outsider – my professional life has been devoted to the investigation of the history of Poland and of the Jews of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As a student at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in the late 1950s, I did develop a strong interest in South African history under the influence of Professor J. S. Marais, author of *The Cape Coloured People 1652–1937* (London, 1939) and *The Fall of Kruger's Republic* (Oxford, 1961). I published my first and only article on South African history in 1959 in a short-lived Marxist theoretical journal at Wits with the title "The 1922 Strike: Some Reflections". This was an examination of the white mineworkers' strike against the weakening of the industrial colour bar which reserved skilled jobs for whites. The strike had been supported by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), which had set up a Workers' Council in the white working-class suburb of Fordsburg, under the slogan "Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa". The party's leaders argued that the strike was not a defence of the industrial colour bar and white supremacy but was directed against the unjustified lowering of the wages of the skilled miners. I concluded my article: "1922 saw the failure of an attempt by the Chamber of Mines to break down the industrial colour bar, which it realized was impeding industrial growth . . . It will only be when, through the pressure of organizations like the Progressive party and the South African Foundation, the colour bar in industry is destroyed that working class unity can be created and the white worker come to realize that his real position in the struggle lies with his black work-mate." This naive observation reflected the political views I then held. I had rejected liberal and parliamentary socialism and adopted a Marxist-Leninist position. In my view, liberalism, which I identified with the paternalism of my parents, was merely a form of sympathy for Africans in their difficult plight, whereas I and those with whom I identified politically had aligned ourselves with the iron laws of history identified by Marx and Engels. These clearly demonstrated, we

believed, that the conflict in South Africa was not racial (as was obvious to most people) but one of class in which we, mostly young Jews and Indians, could find our natural place in the struggle of the local proletariat, along with that of the whole world, for the socialist millenium.

As a result, in my second year at university I joined the Congress of Democrats (COD), although I rejected what I regarded as the excessively dogmatic position of the CPSA, which dominated this front organization. I also participated in a Marxist study circle at the university, which was led by leading members of the CPSA. The one who had most influence on me was Jack Simons, whose relationship with the CPSA was somewhat distant and who set out his views in the book *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850–1950* (London, 1969), which he co-authored with his wife, the more hardline Ray Alexander, and which examined, from their perspective, the relationship of class and racial conflict. Once when we were discussing the South African Marxist obsession with demonstrating that what we were confronted with was a class and not a racial conflict, he observed, “If you want to see how a class conflict is transformed so that it looks like an ethnic or racial struggle, you need to look at the history of Tsarist and Habsburg Empires”. These words remained with me and were one of the reasons which ultimately led me to investigate the history of Poland when, in response to my reaction to the political reality of “real socialism” in Poland and the crude exploitation by the Polish government of antisemitism in the “anti-Zionist campaign” of 1967–68, I abandoned my commitment to this sort of socialism.

Until this campaign, I had always, like most of my political comrades, regarded Jewish issues as marginal and seen the Jews in South Africa as merely one of the white groups supporting apartheid. There were, however, some Jews on the left for whom Jewish issues were more central. In her article, Gilbert mentions Tom Lodge’s *Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party 1921–2021*. This does not have much to say on the motivations of Jews who joined the party. The same is also true of the work of Sheridan Johns, Apollon Davidson, Irina Filatova, and Valentin Gorodnov, and also of Denis Hirson’s biography of his father, Baruch Hirson. This seems to me a major gap in the historiography of Jews in South Africa.

We also need biographical studies of the many Jews who played important roles in leftist movements in South Africa, both the CPSA and other groups, above all the Trotskyites like those in the Unity Movement. Jack Simon’s own life would certainly repay examination. He was born in

Riversdale, Cape Province, in 1907. His mother came from an Afrikaner family while his father was a recent Jewish immigrant. Such marriages were certainly very unusual in the Cape at the turn of the century, but this one was probably possible because Jack's father, an emigrant from the United Kingdom, was already well-established and was the town clerk of Riversdale as well as the owner and publisher of two local newspapers. There is also more to be said about his role as the political commissar of Umkhonto weSizwe (the ANC's military wing) in southern Angola. At the end of his life, he remained true to his socialist convictions, although the collapse of the Soviet Union led him to the view that the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 had been premature.

There is also more to be written on the complex role of the CPSA in the struggle to end apartheid and the subsequent evolution of South African communism. To mention only one issue, it seems to me that the way the U.S. government changed its view on the ANC taking power and its relationship to the collapse of the Soviet Union certainly should be subject to more scholarly investigation. Without this, the U.S. would not have permitted the emergence of what it believed might become a second Cuba. The need for such research has become even more obvious in recent months, given the stance of the South African government on the Russian–Ukrainian conflict.