

Milton Shain, Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Anti-Semitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present¹²

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Milton Shain opens his latest work by declaring that his purpose is “to investigate, trace and unpack hostile attitudes towards Jews and irrational fantasies about them in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa,” not to provide an encyclopaedia of every slight since 1948.⁴ That mission frames four broadly chronological chapters running from the National Party’s 1948 triumph to the dawn of democracy.

Shain’s first thread—the **fascist** element—is illustrated through DF Malan’s 1948 claim that South Africa “belongs to us once more⁵” and his warnings about “Communist Jews.”⁶ The **fantasists** are “conspiracists whose worldview is laced with beliefs in secret plots and international cabals” and who circulated *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*, a “Tsarist Forgery,” in slim pamphlets and cheap booklets. **Fabricators**, finally, are the ideologues and institutions that kept the poison in public view: newspapers such as *Die Afrikaaner*, *South African Observer* and *Behind the News* ensured that “derisory accusations against Jews” lingered well into the 1960s.⁷

From a psychology-of-conspiracy angle, Chapter 2 is the strongest. Pamphleteers, Shain shows, offered “simple answers to complicated social, economic and political questions,” harnessing the frustrations of déclassé “poor whites” and those “inclined to paranoia.” The Protocols’ survival—despite a 1934 Supreme Court judgment branding it a forgery—proves how such fantasies shrug off legal refutation.⁸

Up to the late 1960s the narrative is almost entirely white. Shain justifies this by noting that Jews “had never been a specific political concern for the black majority” fighting white domination.⁹ Only in Chapter 4 does he address black African and Coloured attitudes, quoting Soweto school surveys and AZAPO’s Saths Cooper, who labelled any exploiter “in the Shylock mould.”¹⁰ These pages complicate the notion that antisemitism was solely a white-right fixation.

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12700/jceas.2025.5.3.404>

² Milton Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Anti-Semitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present*. Jacana Media, 2023, xix + 226 pp., \$17,92 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4314-3358-2

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⁴ Milton Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Antisemitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present*. Johannesburg: Jacanda Media, 2023, xix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120-121.



Shain demonstrates that overt Jew-baiting drew scant mass support after 1948, yet the ideas endured by mutating. 1950s prosperity dulled the “Jewish problem”, but 1970s anxiety gave exclusivists a fresh target in “a small international moneyed elite.”¹¹ In the democratic era the trope resurfaced on 1994 strike placards attacking “Jewish capitalists” at Pick n Pay and, in the campus, hate mail catalogued under “The ‘New’ South Africa.”¹²

His earlier volume, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa*, showed how a “wide band of anti-Jewish feeling” was already “well established” by 1930 and that by 1937 the “Jewish Question was ... firmly entrenched within mainstream white politics.” *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists* takes up the baton: marginal fascists push *The Protocols*¹³ anew; state-aligned fabricators revive myths of Jewish economic domination in the 1960s–70s¹⁴; post-1994 fantasists aim the trope at “Jewish capitalists” during labour unrest.¹⁵ *Roots* explains the forging of the stereotype; the new book traces its adaptations under apartheid, decolonisation and identity politics.

Where Shain maps the external sources of hostility, Gideon Shimoni’s *Community and Conscience* looks inward, asking how a “privileged white minority” of Jews weighed apartheid’s moral dilemmas.¹⁶ Shimoni analyses the Board of Deputies’ instinct for political non-involvement¹⁷, shows orthodox caution muting radical voices, and argues that Jews were “more liberal than other whites” yet wary of endangering communal security. Shain’s thematic lens—fascists, fabricators, fantasists—tracks the evolving threat; Shimoni chronicles the community’s calculations as apartheid fell and a new order took shape.¹⁸ The durability of these tropes is no academic curiosity; it is visible in today’s discourse.

Shain’s work lands with fresh urgency. In the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks and Israel’s response in Gaza, South African social-media feeds have again echoed with reheated myths of Jewish omnipotence, altered only by the hashtags of the day. The repertoire first catalogued in 1948 remains intact: whispers of “foreign money” and the ever-useful spectre of George Soros. By tracing anti-Semitism through the decades, Shain equips journalists, educators and security analysts to spot these mutations in real time. His analysis thus illuminates the past while offering a diagnostic lens for the febrile politics of 2025. Recent data from the South African Jewish Board of Deputies sharpen the point: of the 182 anti-Semitic incidents logged between January and November 2023, almost two-thirds—63 percent—occurred after 7 October, and, for the first time this century, roughly six percent involved outright violence, including assault and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, 121-122.

¹³ Milton Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Antisemitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present*. Johannesburg: Jacanda Media, 2023, 50-52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

¹⁶ Gideon Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 241-242.

vandalism.¹⁹ This spike turns Shain's historical mapping into a field manual for the present, demonstrating that yesterday's pamphlets have merely migrated to today's timelines while the animating script remains much the same.

Archival depth, furthermore, bolsters Shain's study: parliamentary speeches, *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK) synod resolutions, strike-era placards and obscure pamphlets give it texture. The triptych prevents the narrative from dissolving into bare chronology. Still, the nuts-and-bolts of state or party information machines receive less attention than a military-history readership might wish, and the treatment of black South African perspectives, while welcome, remains brief.

Drawing on a formidable source base, Shain shows that antisemitism in South Africa never stands still. Fascists, fabricators and fantasists recycle the same stock myths to suit poor-white anxiety, apartheid's crisis of legitimacy and post-1994 identity politics. Though the study might probe information-warfare mechanics and non-white voices more deeply, it remains essential reading for historians, intelligence analysts and anyone tracking how extremist ideas mutate across regimes and media. His closing warning, with a nudge towards historian David Nirenburg—that "fabrications and conspiratorial fantasies offer simple explanations for fearful complexity"²⁰—is as relevant to the digital present as to the pamphlet wars of the past.

References

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¹⁹ Gillian Klawansky, "The Rise of Antisemitic Incidents in SA after October Massacre," *South African Jewish Report*, December 7, 2023, <https://www.sajr.co.za/the-rise-of-antisemitic-incidents-in-sa-after-october-massacre/>

²⁰ Milton Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Antisemitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present*. Johannesburg: Jacanda Media, 2023, 157.