

7 *Liberals and Non-Racism in Namibia's Settler Society? Advocate Israel Goldblatt's Engagement with Namibian Nationalists in the 1960s*¹

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Introduction

Namibia's settler society has a very weak, indeed almost non-existent tradition of advocacy of non-racism. Up to the early 1970s, none of the settlers' political parties postulated principles of non-racism – that is individually based citizenship and democratic rights as well as legal, economic and social opportunities irrespective of apartheid's racial designations and ascriptions. This is in contrast, for example, to political parties in 'white' South Africa or Zimbabwe (See Hancock, 1980; Marks, 1995; Rich, 1984; Vigne, 1997).² South African visitors to Windhoek in the early 1960s, whether Ruth First, the radical left-wing journalist and writer or the Vice-President of the South African Liberal Party, Randolph Vigne, were either appalled or expressed grave disillusionment with respect to the prospect of any European non-racial political activity in this South African colony. Ruth First stated in 1963: 'It remains a frightening fact that not a single white political leader in South West Africa has ever advocated a non-racial democracy' (1963, p. 54). Two years earlier, Randolph Vigne had summed up his talks in Windhoek with, amongst others, Advocate Israel Goldblatt and African nationalists like Clemens Kapuuo, Levy Nganjone or Zedekia Ngavirue by stating: 'If Goldblatt is right, and it is an impossibility to build bridges at this stage [in early 1961], the best hope of bringing about a non-racial group inside SWA and avert[ing] a racial clash, is to afford travel and study to some of the young African leaders ...'³

1 This paper provides in part a summary of arguments presented in the book *Israel Goldblatt. Building Bridges. Namibian Nationalists Clemens Kapuuo, Hosea Kutako, Brendan Simbwaye, Samuel Witbooi*, edited by Dag Henrichsen, Naomi Jacobson and Karen Marshall, Basel, 2010. In the following, I refrain from providing detailed references to the Goldblatt papers and notes, most of which are quoted at length in the book and housed (as copies) at the archives of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB), PA.7, Israel Goldblatt. The viewpoints presented in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the other co-editors of the book.

2 This literature discusses the various liberal, progressive and more radical positions in 'white' southern African societies and provides useful introductions to definitions of concepts, ideologies and paradigms, which I cannot deal with here.

3 NAN AACRLS 096, R. Vigne: 'Confidential Report', 1961.

The literature on the formation of apartheid society in Namibia provides no coherent argument for the notable absence of political thought and practice of non-racism in settler society. Rather, it provides an array of dynamics and arguments for the very rigid entrenchment of racism on all levels of society. In general, as André du Pisani has phrased it, ‘white politics was for all practical reasons seen to be a mere extension of the white South African political scene’ after World War II, by which he, in particular, meant ‘the degree of ideological congruency between the ruling National Party in South Africa and the majority of whites inside the Territory’, that is, Namibia (du Pisani, 1986, pp. 141, 144). The main reason for this, as he points out, was the ‘legal dispute between South Africa and the United Nations’ and its domestic political repercussions (1986, p. 141), an opinion supported by Martin Eberhardt (2007, p. 512ff). Indeed, in Namibia, any advocacy of non-racism was obviously connected to the future of not only the political but also the legal status of the country, that is, the question of its incorporation by or independence from South Africa, and the particular role of the United Nations in this respect.

Namibia’s legal status as a Class C Mandated territory after World War I was highly contested by South Africa. It argued until the 1970s that the Mandate over ‘South West Africa’ had lapsed with the dissolution of the League of Nations and its transformation into the United Nations Organisation in 1946 and that the UN, therefore, had no say in the affairs of Namibia. Consequently, South Africa strove to incorporate Namibia as a fifth province into its own legal and political system of apartheid, so it could also capture a larger number of ‘white’ voters in its colony. It was supported by the local National Party of SWA, the ruling white political party, which, given the increasingly beleaguered settler society in the wake of Africa’s decolonisation, by 1960 dominated the political system and culture in the colony. Among the local white opposition parties, the United National South West Party (UNSWP) argued that the Mandate over SWA was still valid, but that the UN did not become the legal successor of the League of Nations, and thus the party expressly ‘supported the South African Government in its refusal to place South West Africa under UN Supervision’.⁴ Its leader, Advocate Niehaus, had nevertheless suggested greater autonomy for Namibia from South Africa since the early 1950s. The shortlived South West Party (SWP, 1960-1963) of Japie Basson, Ferdinand Lempp and Marga Vaatz also opposed the placing of Namibia under a Trusteeship of the United Nations, while at the same time trying to attract from among the local ‘white’ electorate, voters with any anti-incorporation sentiments. The party propagated the principle of ‘self-government’ for Namibia, and a federal association with South Africa, albeit with little success. In fact, the SWP was mainly concerned with the unity of the three European language groups (English-, Afrikaans- and German-speaking) and as such also, like the other ‘white’ parties, fostered ethnic building blocks (Eberhardt, 2007, p. 504ff).

Apart from the intense extension of South African rule inside Namibia after World War II in the wake of African decolonisation, including the rapid extension of its apartheid and homeland policy and legislation, other general factors contributed to racial entrenchment in Namibia. Important was the rapid economic growth in the colony from the 1950s onwards, accompanied by a steady increase of the settler

4 Quoted from the UNSWP political manifesto of 1954, in Du Pisani, 1986, p. 143.

population (1921: 19,432; 1958: 66,000) and as such the rapid extension of European settler farming and, on a political level, the expansion of apartheid votes (Emmett, 1999, p. 261ff). The conservative 'white' vote also had much to do with the intense occupation amongst the settler society to 'reconcile' the important German-speaking voters after their 'dissident' Nazi politics during the 1930s and now, after World War II the accommodation (and naturalisation) of many Germans within the National Party (Eberhardt, 2007).

Whilst all these developments fostered 'white coherence', factors explaining the absence of any liberal political activities relate, in turn, to the smallness of the settler society, in contrast to South Africa and Zimbabwe and as such implying rigid (informal) measures of social and political control. The very nature of the colonial economy, in turn, could explain the notable absence, for example, of left 'white' trade union activities in Namibia.⁵ Thus, not surprisingly, non-racism as political thought and practice in Namibia and, as such, also any dissident and more radical anti-colonial activities amongst the settlers, were virtually absent. It seems that the first non-racial political party in Namibia was the Federal Party, formed in the mid-1970s and led by Advocate Bryan O'Linn (O'Linn, 2003, pp. 65f, 88ff, 129). Whilst this did not mean the absence of any critical (public) discussions,⁶ these remained during the 1960s, mostly relegated to the private sphere. Any public non-racial or radical positions amongst Europeans in the 1960s, it seems, came from a few clergymen like the Anglican Bishop Robert Mize or a couple of German pastors. They all, like the Rev Michael Scott who was internationally active on behalf of the Herero Chiefs' Council, came from outside the country, and were only temporarily based in Namibia, and several faced deportation.⁷

This chapter reflects on the endeavours of Israel Goldblatt (1897-1982), a legal practitioner from Cape Town residing and practising in Namibia since the early 1920s and being by 1964 the most senior advocate in the whole of Namibia and South Africa, to contribute towards a non-racial vision for Namibia in the 1960s. Whilst Goldblatt deliberately chose what he regarded as a non-political approach, and as such clearly emphasised the limits of his engagements, his endeavours nevertheless provide the wider context in which any articulations and actions of settler non-racism or, to phrase

5 These issues would definitely warrant in-depth research. Amongst the German population, an *Arbeiterverband* did exist, though its history and political credo is not known (Eberhardt, 2007, p. 156). Scant details are also known about a group of German-speaking anarchists in the late 1920s. Pers. info. from Giorgio Miescher (Basel).

6 Apart from O'Linn's work (2003) and its many references to the different political opinions amongst Europeans in the 1960s and 1970s, see also the detailed analysis of Eberhardt (2007, p. 506ff) and the few references to any non-racial thought as expressed, for example, by Marga Vaatz. It should be noted that neither she nor other SWP leaders maintained, as far as is known, regular contacts with African politicians.

7 Various mission church bodies became important radical advocates of change after World War II, though mainly through the influence of African clergymen (for example Bishop Auala) and, to a lesser extent, through clergymen from outside the country (such as Rev. Michael Scott from the late 1940s onwards, or, from the 1960s, various young West German clergymen and clergywomen, for example Pastor Wienecke). On the very conservative European leadership for the various Rhenish Mission congregations in Namibia until the early 1970s, and 'rebels' like Wienecke, see Gockel (2010). On the progressive position of the Anglican Church in the 1960s, see my comments with reference to Bishop Mize in this chapter.

it differently, dissenting political positions vis-à-vis mainstream ‘white’ politics took and could take place.

Israel Goldblatt and his vision for an independent Namibia

It is perhaps not surprising that it was the shooting at the Old Location in Windhoek on Thursday 10 December 1959 that spurred Israel Goldblatt to reflect on the future of Namibia. As is well known, on that day, simmering protest in the Old Location, Windhoek’s main African township, burst into open conflict when a group of European officials, confronted with a large number of protesters, called in the police, with grave consequences. By the next morning, approximately 12 men and one woman had been shot dead and more than 50 people injured.⁸ Society at large, its African majority as well as its minority settler society, was deeply shocked by such brutal violence which for many, not only Africans, was regarded as having been deliberately provoked.⁹ For the African political parties and bodies, that is SWANU, which had been founded in the Old Location only three months before the shooting, in September 1959, the slightly older worker’s movement, OPO, formed in April 1959, as well as the then dominant African political body in the colony, the Herero Chiefs’ Council (HCC), 10 December became a national day of mourning and resistance. ‘To the memory of those who were murdered by the forces of Apartheid. Their blood will sink in, not in vain, and will inspire others’, read the inscription of a commemorative tombstone which was erected on the initiative of leading politicians of the Old Location, only to be instantly demolished by unknown forces (Goldblatt, 2010, p. 54).

Israel Goldblatt did not become directly involved, as a lawyer and advocate, in the official Commission of Enquiry instituted after the shooting and presided over by its sole member, Justice Cyril Hall. He was briefly consulted by Rev. Bartholomew Karuera of the Herero Chiefs’ Council when their legal representative, the South African lawyer and Deputy President-General of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, was barred from entering Windhoek in January 1960.¹⁰ As Sam Nujoma, a leader in the Old Location conflict who was faced with a deportation order and whom Tambo was also to represent, remembered, the ‘magistrate did not want to be confronted by a black lawyer’.¹¹ In Namibia at the time there was not a single African lawyer.

8 The first reliable list of the victims was published by the *South West News* (SWN), the newspaper issued in 1960 by activists and journalists in the Old Location, in its first issue, 5 March 1960, Vol. 1, No 1, p. 4.

9 See the comments by Dan Minnaar of the *Windhoek Advertiser*, as quoted by Vigne in his ‘Confidential Report’ 1961, in NAN AARCLS 096.

10 According to Rev. Karuera in a conversation with DH, 2006.

11 Tambo was hired to defend those accused of organising the resistance in the Old Location in December 1959, amongst them Sam Nujoma and Nathaniel Mbaeva. Nujoma himself, who since late December had faced deportation, had initially approached the lawyer Lucian Goldblatt, Israel Goldblatt’s son (Nujoma, 2001, p. 80; Ngavirue, 1997, p. 270). After the refusal to allow Tambo to enter Windhoek, the attorney Wentzel, on the suggestion of liberal politicians in South Africa and funded by Michael Scott’s Africa Bureau in London, made submissions to the Hall Commission, which, according to Vigne, were ignored (1997, p. 185).