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*Basic biographical data*

Name:	Baruch Hirson
Other names (byname, pseud. etc.):	R. Mettler ; K. Shanker
Date and place of birth:	December 19, 1921, Doomfontein (South Africa)
Date and place of death:	October 3, 1999, London (Great Britain)
Nationality:	South African, British
Occupations, careers:	Historian, editor, physicist, lecturer, political activist
Time of activity in Trotskyist movement:	1944 - 1999 (lifelong Trotskyist)

Biographical sketch

*Note: This short biographical sketch is based upon the obituaries and appraisals listed under Selective bibliography: Books and articles about Hirson, below. Additionally, Hirson's autobiographical work *Revolutions in my life* (1995) has been consulted.*

Baruch Hirson was born on December 19*, 1921 at Doomfontein near Johannesburg in the Transvaal province (South Africa) as a son of Joseph Hirson, an electrician, and his wife Lily (b. Clingman). The parents were Jews who had immigrated to South Africa from Latvia, which then formed part of the Czarist Empire. The boy was named after his recently deceased grandfather, but in conformity with attempts of better integrating into the new society was often called Bertram or Bertie for short. In 1946 Hirson married Yael Sherman (b. 1926) who later became a pediatrician. The couple got two sons and one daughter: Denis, Allen and Zoe.

Hirson grew up in a lower middle-class white Jewish community, was sent to the Talmud Torah (a

* One of the obituaries cited below erroneously gives December 10 as date of birth.

Hebrew school) at the age of four, and attended primary school and high school from 1927 to 1938 and then earned his living by various jobs. In the 1940s Hirson, enjoying great mathematical ability and insight, began to study physics part-time at the *University of Witwatersrand*, and later worked as a lecturer and teacher there until his arrestation in 1964, combining his modest academic career as a physicist with infatigable political and organizational activities (see below).

After finishing his school education, around 1939 Hirson became involved in Zionist youth clubs and groups before in 1940 he became a member of the left-wing *Hashomer Hatzair* group. In the following years he more and more approached Marxism, and during all his adult life Hirson advocated anti-Zionist positions considering Israeli policies quite similar to the political patterns of the racist South African regime. Undoubtedly, Hirson belonged to those Jews who – to paraphrase Isaac Deutscher – can be described as *non-Jewish Jews*, true internationalists, disliking any brand of nationalism, racism or communalism.

Radicalizing and studying Marxist literature when still a member of *Hashomer Hatzair*, Hirson since 1944 subsequently joined various Trotskyist groups and remained an adherent – albeit in a not uncritical manner – of Trotskyism.

Thus he became a member of *FIOSA (Fourth International Organization of South Africa)* and from 1944-1946 he worked as a full-time political organizer for the *Workers' International League (WIL)*, another ephemeral South African Trotskyist group. However, all South African Trotskyist groups at that time remained weak and quite isolated, and none of those groups of which Hirson was a key figure could develop into a real party or gain mass influence. Nevertheless Hirson and a handful of other devoted Trotskyists were busy in working and struggling for the development of black trade unions and they often joined organizations of the 'broader left' as well as trade unions aiming at political influence therein. They did so under extremely difficult conditions determined by the absolutely uncompromising racist and anti-communist politics marked by the notorious *Suppression of Communism Act* and by institutionalising *Apartheid*, introduced by the governing *Nationalist Party* since 1950.

Thus Hirson and other South African Trotskyists engaged in the *Non-European Unity Movement*, and at the end of the 1950s he joined the *Congress of Democrats*, the white arm of the *Congress Alliance* which was led by the *African National Congress (ANC)* during the 1950s. From within the *Congress Alliance* Hirson co-organized the Trotskyist *Socialist League of Africa (SLA)*.

In the aftermath of the bloody police massacre of unarmed civilians at Sharpeville in 1960, both the Trotskyists around Hirson, organized in a *National Committee for Liberation* (later renamed *African Resistance Movement, ARM*) and a faction within the *ANC* consisting of younger elements turned to the use of direct action, for example sabotage, as a substitute for mass agitation and peaceful action. Both the leading activists of the *ANC** and the *ARM* soon fell victim to police suppression and judicial persecution. Thus in 1964 Hirson as a leading spirit of the *ARM*, too, was arrested, convicted of sabotage and eventually imprisoned for 9 years which he spent in various Johannesburg and Pretoria jails. A few days after his release in 1973 he was confronted with a banning order and house arrest. He immediately decided to go into exile, and together with his wife and three children Hirson arrived in England in 1973. There he was able to find a university job, first at *Bradford University*, then at *Middlesex Polytechnic* (which later became *Middlesex University*) where for several years he lectured in physics and in 1986 took a doctorate in history**, while his wife could continue to earn living as pediatrician.

* The most prominent victim of the Apartheid regime was undoubtedly *Nelson Mandela*, a leader of the then banned *ANC*, who was arrested, tried and sentenced in the same year as Baruch Hirson and who was only released in February 1990, was elected unopposed president of the *ANC* and later became the first black President of the Republic of South Africa.

** Hirson, Baruch: *The making of the African working class on the Witwatersrand*. PhD 1986, 318 pp.

During the long years of imprisonment Hirson had developed into a historian; his British exile years – he never went back to South Africa after the fall of Apartheid except for a short visit in 1991 when participating there in a conference on Marxism – were the most fruitful years of his life: relying on a considerable private archive of South African documents he became the author of more than a dozen excellent and meticulously researched and annotated historical monographs and other works in the field of history and biography. Thus he published for example a chronology of the famous Soweto uprising (*Year of fire, year of ash, 1979*), an account of working-class rebellion in South Africa (*Yours for the union, 1989*), biographies about David Ivon Jones (*The delegate for Africa, 1995*) and about Ruth Schechter (*The Cape Town intellectuals*, publ. posthumously in 2001), to mention only a few of his books. In 1992 he completed an autobiography dealing with his African years 1921-1973 which was published in 1995, and shortly before his decease in 1999 he had finished work on the manuscript of a rich biography about C. Frank Glass, published posthumously as a book in 2004 with the title *The restless revolutionary*. Besides the mentioned works, Hirson authored some 50 contributions to scholarly journals and to seminars on South Africa held by London University's *Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS)* with which Hirson was closely associated. Furthermore, from 1988-1995 Hirson edited (and at the same time contributed the bulk of articles published therein) a journal titled *Searchlight South Africa* which according to an obituary published in *The Independent* "was in its time the best and most challenging journal of South African studies produced anywhere in the world"*. Baruch Hirson was co-editor of *Revolutionary History* as well as of *Critique*, two renowned non-partisan and non-sectarian journals of the British left. During the last years of his life he kept a lively correspondence with the Chinese veteran Trotskyist Wang Fanxi (then living in Leeds, England) and with the American photographer and ex-guard of Leon Trotsky, Alex Buchman; amongst Hirson's closest collaborators were Hillel Ticktin and Paul Trehwela.

Whilst pleased with the 1994 definitive demise of the odious and rotten *Apartheid* regime in South Africa, which he had opposed and actively fought all his adult life, he was quite unhappy if not surprised by the liberal pro-capitalist path being led by the new *ANC* government. He was not contemptuous of civil liberties but he never revised his very conviction that social oppression was essentially economic in its causes.

Having suffered from declining health throughout the 1990s, housebound and often in pain over the last few years of his life, Baruch Hirson died, aged 77, on October 3, 1999 in a London hospital, survived by his wife Yael and their 3 children.

"With Baruch's passing, we have lost a dear and courageous comrade, a deep and incisive thinker, an authority on South African affairs, and a link with the past"**.

* Trehwela, Paul: Baruch Hirson, in: *The Independent*, 1999 (Oct. 5, Tuesday review). It should be mentioned that *Searchlight South Africa* was banned by South Africa's then *Apartheid* government and at the same time was shunned by the CP of *South Africa* and the *ANC*, respectively.

** Flewers, Paul: Baruch Hirson (1921-1999), in: *Against the Current*, n.s. 14.2000 (6=84), p.44.

*Selective bibliography**

- ***Selective bibliography: Books/pamphlets (co-)authored by Hirson***

- Address to the inaugural meeting of the Students' Fellowship Society. - Johannesburg : Univ. of Witwatersrand, Students' Fellowship Soc., [s.d.] - 8 pp.
- The Cape Town intellectuals : Ruth Schechter and her circle, 1907-1934. - Johannesburg : Witwatersrand Univ. Pr., 2001. - XXXI, 253 pp.
- The delegate for Africa : David Ivon Jones, 1883-1924 / Baruch Hirson and Gwyn Williams. - London : Core Publications, 1995. - 272 pp.
- Friend to Olive Schreiner : the story of Ruth Schechter. - London : Inst. of Commonwealth Studies, Univ. of London, 1992. - 8 pp. [Postgraduate seminar paper, pres. May 15, 1992]
- A history of the Left in South Africa : writings of Baruch Hirson / ed. by Yael Hirson. - London [etc.] : Tauris, 2005. - XIX, 268 pp. - (International library of African studies ; 15)
- It's time to awake / R. Mettler [i.e. Baruch Hirson]. - [S.l.], 1957. - 43 pp. [Critique of *'The awakening of the people'* by I.B. Tabata]
- The IWA and the ICU : 1917-1920. - London : Inst. of Commonwealth Studies, Univ. of London, 1992. - 7 pp. [Postgraduate seminar paper, pres. May 5, 1995]
- Land, labour, and the black republic. - [S.l., s.d.] - 24 pp.
- The making of the African working class on the Witwatersrand : class and community struggles in an urban setting, 1932-47. - London : Middlesex Polytechnic, 1986. - 318 pp. [PhD]
- The restless revolutionary : Frank Glass / [introd.: Gregor Benton]. - London : Porcupine Pr., [2004]. - XVI, 251, [8] pp. [Publ. posthumously]
- Revolutions in my life. - Johannesburg : Witwatersrand Univ. Pr., 1995. - XVIII, 365 pp. [Autobiography]
- Strike across the Empire : the seamen's strike of 1925 in Britain, South Africa and Australasia / Baruch Hirson and Lorraine Vivian. - London : Clio, 1992. - III, 117 pp.
- The workers conference and national protest / K. Shanker [i.e. Baruch Hirson]. - [S.l., s.d.] - 6 pp.
- Year of fire, year of ash : the Soweto revolt, roots of a revolution? - London : Zed Pr., 1979. - X, 348 pp. - (Africa series ; 3)
- Yours for the union : class and community struggles in South Africa, 1930-1947. - London [etc.] : Zed Books [etc.], 1989. - XIII, 230 pp.

- ***Selective bibliography: Books/pamphlets and journals (co-)edited by Hirson.***

- Analysis : a survey of contemporary events (Johannesburg) <TSB 0025>
- Critique : a journal of socialist theory (Glasgow) [ISSN 0301-7605]
- Letters from the Chinese revolution / Rayna Prohme, Arthur Knodel and Baruch Hirson, ed. - Richmond : Curzon, 1998. - 220 pp.
- Revolutionary History (London) [ISSN 0953-2382] <TSB 1375>
- Searchlight South Africa (London) [ISSN 0954-3384] <TSB 1461>
- South Africa : the war of 1899-1902 and the Chinese labour question : guide / Baruch Hirson, ed. - East Ardsley, West Yorkshire : Microform Ltd., 1983. - I, 65 pp. [Guide to a microfilm collection under same title]

* TSB item numbers (e.g. <TSB 0716>) refer to Lubitz' *Trotskyist Serials Bibliography*, München [etc.] : Saur, 1993, which is out of print but available as PDF file within the framework of *TrotskyanaNet*. In TSB you can find detailed descriptions concerning the respective Trotskyist journals, newsletters, bulletins and the like.

- **Selective bibliography: Books, collections, journals, bulletins to which Hirson contributed**

- L'Afrique du Sud aujourd'hui = South Africa today / Société Africaine de Culture / Richard Turner [et al.] - Paris : Présence Africaine, 1978. - 439 pp. - (Cahiers Présence africaine)
- Analysis : a survey of contemporary events (Johannesburg) <TSB 0025>
- Critique : a journal of socialist theory (Glasgow) [ISSN 0301-7605]
- Documents sur le mouvement trotskyste en Afrique du Sud / Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Mouvements Trotskyste et Révolutionnaire Internationaux. - Paris, 1994. - 51 pp. - (Les cahiers du C.E.R.M.T.R.I. ; 72)
- New Interventions (Brighton, later: Worthing; later: Coventry) [ISSN 1464-6757]
- Radical Chains (London) [1466-4631]
- Revolutionary History (London) [ISSN 0953-2382] <TSB 1375>
- Searchlight South Africa (London) [ISSN 0954-3384] <TSB 1461>
- Socialist Action (Johannesburg) <TSB 1485>
- The societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Century (London)
- The Trotsky reappraisal / ed. by Terry Brotherstone and Paul Dukes. Transl. by Brian Pearce, Jenny Brine and Andrew Drummond. - Edinburgh : Edinburgh Univ. Pr., 1992. - X, 249 pp.

- **Selective bibliography: Books and articles about Hirson**

- [Anon.]: Baruch Hirson, 1921-1999 : historian, editor and political activist.
URL: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/hirson-b.htm> [Biographical sketch]
- Flewers, Paul: Baruch Hirson (1921-1999), in: *New Interventions*, 9.2000 (4), p. 31. [Obituary]
- Flewers, Paul: Baruch Hirson (1921-1999), in: *Against the Current*, <TSB 0014> n.s. 14.2000 (6=84) : p. 44 [Obituary. Followed by excerpts from a tribute by Paul Trehwela, originally publ. in *The independent*]
- Hirson, Baruch: Revolutions in my life [Autobiography, see for bibliographic description the paragraph *Selective bibliography: Books(pamphlets (co-)authored by Hirson, above)*]
- Hunter, Ian: Baruch Hirson (1921-1999), in: *Revolutionary History* <TSB 1375>, 7.2000 (3), pp. 278-282. [Obituary]
- Lodge, Tom: Baruch Hirson : Marxist teacher jailed for his part in South Africa's freedom struggle, in: *The Guardian*, 1999 (Oct. 19), p. 20. [Obituary. Followed by amendment by Ian Hunter]
- Trehwela, Paul: Baruch Hirson, in: *The Independent*, 1999 (Oct. 5, Tuesday review). [Obituary]

Note: More informations about Hirson is likely to be found in the books, pamphlets, university works and articles listed in the relevant chapter(s) of our *Trotsky Bibliography*, 3. Ed., München [etc.], 1999, e.g. in chapter 7.5.14 and 8.2.02.

Sidelines, notes on archives

- *Book announcement:* A collection of Hirson's historical studies on South Africa has been announced for publication in 2005:
History of the Left in South Africa : writings of Baruch Hirson / ed. by Yael Hirson. - London: Tauris,
- *From Paul Flewer's personal reminiscences of Hirson:* "I first met Baruch about 12 years ago. I had many long talks with him in his North London house, on all manner of subjects, largely but by no means always on political matters, as he had a wide range of interests. I was always made very welcome by him and his wife Yael. He criticised in an intelligent and sharp manner many of the sacred cows of the left, its constant dalliances with non-socialist movements. He had become

critical of the group's move into sabotage tactics and was insistent that the left should not engage in guerrillaism. I and others who talked with him always felt that although we might not agree with what he said, nobody left him without feeling that the discussions had been most worthwhile and thought-provoking."*

— *Baruch Hirson at WWW*: Within the *Marxists Internet Archives (MIA)* website there is a *Baruch Hirson* text archive containing some 10 articles from his pen written between 1956 and 1990 plus a biographical sketch about him, written by Paul Flowers.

URL: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/hirson/>

— *Note on archives*: Papers written or collected by Baruch Hirson on South African politics as well as some personal papers are preserved at the *Institute of Commonwealth Studies* (University of London) (ICS), the reference code is GB 0101 ICS 32. Hirson himself had deposited the papers there. See the entity statement at: <http://www.aim25.acv.uk/cats/16/4829.htm>.

Note: The photograph on p.1 has been taken from Hirson, Baruch: *Revolutions in my life*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand Pr., 1995, © Fred Prager

W. Lubitz, rev. July 2007

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* Flowers, Paul: Baruch Hirson (1921-1999), in: *Against the Current*, <TSB 0014> n.s. 14.2000 (6=84) : p. 44.