Baruch Hirson

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Basic biographical data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Baruch Hirson</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other names (by-names, pseud. etc.):</td>
<td>R. Mettler ; K. Shanker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date and place of birth:</td>
<td>December 19, 1921, Doomfontein (South Africa)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date and place of death:</td>
<td>October 3, 1999, London (Great Britain)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationality:</td>
<td>South African, British</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occupations, careers:</td>
<td>Historian, editor, physicist, lecturer, political activist</td>
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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 (1926-?) who later became a paediatrician. 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 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 indefatigable 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-

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

Radicalising 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 un-critical 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 Trotskyists 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 paediatrician.

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 Ivan Jones (1883-1924) (title of biography: The delegate for Africa, 1995) and about Ruth Schechter (Ruth Farrington Schechter, 1888-1942) (title of biography: 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 schol-
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Bio-Bibliographical Sketch

Early 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 Trewhela.

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".

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.


  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]


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4) Trewhela, 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.


6) 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 the Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet website. In TSB you can find detailed descriptions concerning the respective Trotskyist journals, newsletters, bulletins and the like.

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- **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]
Revolutionary History (London) [ISSN 0953-2382] <TSB 1375>
Searchlight South Africa (London) [ISSN 0954-3384] <TSB 1461>

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

Analysis: a survey of contemporary events (Johannesburg) <TSB 0025>
Critique: a journal of socialist theory (Glasgow) [ISSN 0301-7605]
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)

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

[Anon.]: Baruch Hirson. [Biographical sketch, Wikipedia article]
[Anon.]: Baruch Hirson, 1921-1999: historian, editor and political activist. [Biographical sketch, Electronic resource]
[Obituary. Followed by excerpts from a tribute by Paul Trewhela, 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]

Note: More information about Hirson is likely to be found in the books, pamphlets, university works, and articles listed in the relevant chapter(s) of the Lubitz' Leon Trotsky Bibliography <ISSN 2190-0183>, e.g. in chapter

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Sidelines, notes on archives

— 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: The Marxists Internet Archives (MIA) website contains a Baruch Hirson text archive containing some articles from his pen written between 1956 and 1990 plus a biographical sketch about him, written by Ian Hunter.

— 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 (53 boxes). Hirson himself had deposited the papers there. See the identity statement.

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

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