

Panel report:

Faces and Masks: Divergent Representation of South Africa and South Africans in European Circles

Lucerne, 09.07.2025, Seventh Swiss Historical Congress

Organizers: Aline Martello / Jasper Walgrave

Participants: Aline Martello / Jasper Walgrave / Estelle Sohier

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This panel explored narratives on South Africa and how its population was represented in Swiss and European circles during the 19th and 20th centuries. Contributing to the current historiographical debates on Swiss involvement in colonial dynamics, the panelists analyzed how South African issues, such as gold mining and white supremacy during the apartheid era were presented in Switzerland.

ESTELLE SOHIER (Geneva) spoke about how the social and environmental impact of mining activities in the Transvaal gold fields was reported by Swiss media in the 19th and 20th centuries, as part of a project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

Sohier used 'slow violence'¹ as a key concept in her presentation. This kind of violence occurs gradually and far away. In the case of the Transvaal gold fields, where 40% of the global gold supply was extracted from the late 19th through the 20th century, slow violence had major social consequences, evoking the 'racial contract'². The racial contract prescribed how to allocate tasks according to skin color, giving black people dangerous, menial and low paying jobs. Sohier further mentioned the environmental consequences of gold mining, including the massive pollution of subsoil, water and land. She explained how these issues remained invisible because the media did not emphasize the social and environmental consequences of gold mining and therefore did not impact South African mine representation in Switzerland at the time.

This visual representation was mainly found in photographs, such as the ones by Henri-Ferdinand Gros, official photographer of the British Army, whose photos were exposed at the 1889 Paris Exposition. These images can be described as "toxic sublime", as they were created specifically to attract investors to South Africa by showing the activity and the richness of these mines.

¹ Nixon, Rob: *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard 2011.

² Hecht Durham, Gabrielle: *Residual Governance: how South Africa foretells planetary futures*. Durham 2023.

Swiss fascination with the gold mines also shaped an idea of 'Transvaal'. Media sources obtained by searching for 'Transvaal' on *letempsarchives.ch*³ show how this region was associated with adventure and heroism during the 'gold rush'. Explaining how popular media spread this concept, Sohler denoted these representations of Transvaal as an international movement, giving the example of epic novels such as *King Solomon's Mines* by Henry Rider Haggard (1885), and *The Vanished Diamond* by Jules Verne (1884).

As a transition to the panel presentations, Sohler mentioned how the South African government tried to take advantage of these images from the end of the gold rush, showing a 1965 poster that presents the Transvaal gold fields as a tourist attraction.

In his contribution, **JASPER WALGRAVE** (Brussels) dealt with another aspect of South African cultural representation in Switzerland: how Swiss pro-apartheid groups tried to regulate the perception of black South Africans in Switzerland.

Presenting an extract from his PhD thesis on Swiss-South African cultural relations during the apartheid era⁴, Walgrave illustrated the question of white supremacy as a cultural ideology during apartheid, emphasizing the case of the Swiss pro-segregation philologist and translator Peter Sulzer who psychologized anti-segregation positions in black South African literature. Sulzer's discreditation of black South African literature and cultures is exemplified in his German translation of Thomas Mofolo's work: *Chaka*. Seen by many scholars as a return to African roots, Sulzer interpreted the work of this Mosotho writer – who was raised by Swiss Protestant missionaries – as a criticism of heathen lives and a glorification of Christian conversion.

Among the examples used by Walgrave to illustrate the heterogeneity of the images of black South Africans in Switzerland were anti-apartheid articles written by a journalist named Rosner in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) during the 1950s and 1960s.

In the last panel contribution, **ALINE MARTELLO** (Lausanne) presented a chapter from her ongoing PhD thesis about two francophone anti-apartheid movements: one Belgian and one Swiss, between the mid-1960s and the end of apartheid in 1994. Her presentation highlighted a blind spot of the anti-apartheid movement research: the Swiss women's commitment to the cause, found in documents of the *Mouvement anti-apartheid de Suisse* (MAAS) archives.

One of the organizations with substantial female representation was the *Commission de parrainage scolaire du Mouvement anti-apartheid de Suisse*, a non-profit organization dedicated to the education of political refugees' children that received considerable donations in the end of the 1970s, following the Soweto uprising. Martello emphasized the transnational dimension of their

³ Letempsarchives.ch have the digitised editions of the Swiss French-speaking daily newspapers *Journal de Genève*, *Gazette de Lausanne* and *Le Nouveau Quotidien*, that merged in 1998, creating *Le Temps*.
<https://www.letempsarchives.ch/>

⁴ Walgrave, Jasper: *A Culture of Discreet Complicity. Swiss men mediating cultural action to and from South Africa 1948-1994*, PhD Thesis, University of Fribourg, Fribourg 2024.

work, by mentioning the fact that the money was sent to South Africa by a British protestant organization that supported South African political prisoners and their families.

Martello pointed out that most women who were part of MAAS remained largely invisible, like Antoinette Messeri or Helena Mach, even though they were part of the bourgeoisie of the Romandie and could have been heard in this more influential echelon of society.

Martello went on to speak about more visible examples of female actors such as Diane Perrot, a white South African woman who was married to Alain Perrot, a pastor and founder of MAAS, and Aimée Stitelmann, an atypical profile because she was a divorced woman close to the Swiss Party of Labour, who helped Spanish political refugees.

Finally, Martello explained MAAS' portrayal of black South African women. As a Protestant philanthropic network, it focused on the importance these women placed on biological roles of motherhood and wifehood during a period of debates surrounding women's representative rights in Switzerland.

The panel's interdisciplinary dimension presented an overview of how heterogeneous Swiss actors in transnational networks contributed to different representations of South Africa via the circulation of images and narratives.

Álvaro Tomás Gonçalves Sousa

Panel overview:

Estelle Sohier: (In)visibility of the Origin of Precious Metals in Switzerland. Imagining the Infrastructure and Workers of the Transvaal Mines after the Gold Rush (Sources, Methods and Environmental Perspectives)

Jasper Walgrave: Writing the Colour Line. European Representations of South African Literature

Aline Martello: Making Visible the Anti-Apartheid Cause in Switzerland and in Belgium

Franziska Rüedi: From Ulundi to Zurich: Epistolary Networks and Perceptions of Apartheid in Europe (absent)

Ndjaka Mtsetwene: Forced Resettlements and Swiss-Missionary Owned Farms in Apartheid South Africa (absent)

This report is part of the infoclio.ch documentation of the [7th Swiss Congress of Historical Sciences](#).

Citation: Gonçalves Sousa, Álvaro Tomás: Faces and Masks: Divergent Representation of South Africa and South Africans in European Circles, infoclio.ch-Tagungsberichte, 12.08.2025. Online: <<https://doi.org/10.13098/infoclio.ch-tb-0345>>.