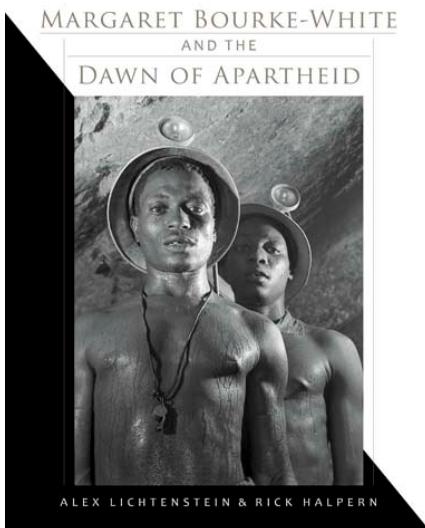


Lichtenstein, Alex and Halpern, Rick. *Margaret Bourke-White and the Dawn of Apartheid* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016, pp. 152, ISBN 978-0-253-02126-7), reviewed by Harvey C. Chidoba Banda (chanaichi2002@yahoo.co.uk; harveybanda9@gmail.com; Department of History, Mzuzu University, Malawi).



This book makes an attempt to correct, in the authors' words, an unfortunate distortion of Margaret Bourke-White's contribution to photography, an emphasis of her authentication of industrial processes that obscures her far more politicized portrayal of human subjects faced with exploitation, poverty, genocide, war, colonialism and apartheid (p. 1). The significance of the book, therefore, lies in the ability to present in book form two issues at once: the priceless photographs of (or by) Margaret Bourke-White and the genesis, as it were, of the subject that up to now takes center stage in South Africa's history: apartheid. However, from the outlook, even merely looking at the book title, *Margaret Bourke-White and the Dawn of Apartheid*, one is left wondering as to why Alex Lichtenstein and Rick Halpern decided to merge two incompatible aspects, the life story of

Margaret Bourke-White and the dawn of apartheid, in one book. However, it is only after reading through the contents of the book that one comes to terms with the saying "don't judge a book by its cover." The two aspects in question are actually compatible: Bourke-White's expertise in photography and photojournalism enabled her to expose the ills of apartheid to the rest of the world.

It is not a surprise that the two co-authored this book. This is not only because of their respective expertise and notable achievements in academia, but also because of their compatible research interests in such fields as labor and race relations. Alex Lichtenstein's research focuses on the intersection of labor history and the struggle for racial justice in societies shaped by white supremacy. His first book was *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (1996). Subsequently, he has written extensively about race relations in the labor movement, interracial agrarian radicalism, early civil rights struggles, and the impact of anticommunism on the labor and civil rights movement. Rick Halpern is a social historian whose work has focused on race and labor in a number of national and international contexts. He is author of *Racialising Class, Classifying Race: Labor and Difference in Britain, the USA, and Africa* (and other books). Currently, he is researching the long interplay between photography, race, and class in Canada and the United States over the course of the twentieth century.

The book is structured as follows: a crisp introduction in which Alex introduces the book, in the process highlighting the highs and lows of the book; the section on two essays; and, last but not least, the section on photographs. One of the strengths of the book is that they have included these two scholarly essays and they have provided the reader with worthwhile historical background. However, one notable weakness, even Alex Lichtenstein admits, is that there are no original captions to the photographs. However, the authors have given a justification for it, arguing these are unrecoverable (p. 5). Another weakness, though slight and of typographical nature, is on the names of the authors themselves: Rick or Eric Halpern? Alex or Alexander Lichtenstein? This will end up confusing the reader!

In chapter 1 titled ‘South Africa at the Crossroads’, Rick Halpern writes about the ascendancy to power of the Nationalists (National Party) under D.F. Malan, and, after winning the 1948 elections, their racial segregation policies against black people in South Africa. On this, Halpern argues, Malan and his cohorts had indicated that “one of the primary means to accomplish the racial reconstruction of the nation was a policy of apartheid, a word meaning apartness in the Afrikaans language, and a concept that enjoyed some currency among Afrikaans intellectuals as far back as the early twentieth century” (p. 9). It is noteworthy that it was the introduction of this racial order (apartheid) that prompted *Life* (magazine) to send Margaret Bourke-White to South Africa to document developments surrounding it. Halpern succinctly argues that within a decade after introducing apartheid, South Africa became a full-fledged racial police state, “replete with a total ban on opposition politics, the torture, murder, imprisonment, and banishing of its leadership, and a largely complacent and materially comfortable white minority” (p. 20).

With time South Africa received heavy criticism from the international community including the United States, Britain and other European allies. When Margaret Bourke-White arrived in South Africa in 1949, she immediately became opposed to this segregationist state. In fact, Halpern shows, Bourke-White proved to be one of apartheid’s earliest and most ardent critics. This pressure from the international community went hand in hand with internal opposition, especially masterminded by the African National Congress (ANC). Rick Halpern argues that, specifically, the ‘torchbearers’ of this ‘internal opposition’ included such vibrant activists as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Oliver Tambo. However, political suppression drove most of the ANC members into exile, from where they continued to fight against this repressive regime. In short, Halpern points out that although the causes of the ‘demise’ of apartheid in 1990 were many, “primary among them was the powerful visual imagery that revealed the naked brutality of South Africa’s system of racial oppression to concerned people around the world” (p. 20).

In chapter 2 titled “From Cleveland to Johannesburg: Margaret Bourke-White’s Journey to South Africa”, Alex Lichtenstein brilliantly begins the chapter with Bourke-White’s illustrious career or profile. The latter automatically puts the reader on his or her toes with anticipation about the sojourns of “the most admired industrial photographer and photojournalist of the 1930s” (p. 23), Margaret Bourke-White, in South Africa. Launching her career in the 1920s, Margaret later turned her lens to more “social subjects”. However, in explaining Margaret Bourke-White’s professional story as a photographer and photojournalist, there seems to be an element of repetition in the accounts by Rick Halpern and Alex Lichtenstein, for example, on Margaret’s initial love of industrial photography and how she later switched from her obsession with, and focus on, industrial machines toward ‘more human subjects’.

Alex discusses in more detail how Margaret rose to fame because of expertise in her profession. “Bourke-White”, writes Alex, “remained an alluring figure, perhaps the only genuine photojournalist celebrity of her day” (pp. 35-36). In this connection, in *Coronet* magazine, she was described as “an amazing combination of daring dynamo and girl scout” (p. 36). However, as is the case with any other professional, Bourke-White had her own critics. Alex highlights criticisms that were leveled against her, not only by the general public, but also by her fellow photographers: “Some scholars of documentary photography and 1930s culture dismiss her work as overly sentimentalized or sensationalistic compared to that of (other) photographers, and they further imply that she was imperious and manipulative in her treatment of her human subjects” (p. 39). However, later scholars, Alex argues, have been “more forgiving, recognizing how Bourke-White’s background as a commercial and industrial photographer shaped her method, often with positive results” (p. 39). This method later proved useful when she documented the horrors of apartheid.

It is in order that the focus of this memoir is the dawn of apartheid and Bourke-White’s sojourns in South Africa. This is because the many trips she made to different parts of the world were a good preparation for her trip to South Africa. She visited Europe and Eastern Europe during the Second World War and immediately after, before proceeding to India. In this connection, Alex shows, Bourke-White later wrote to her friend “I felt much better equipped to understand South Africa after intensive work in India” (p. 47). During her stay in South Africa, Margaret cleverly maneuvered her way, in the process taking many photographs which eventually discredited apartheid South Africa in the eyes of the international community. It is indicated that following Margaret’s departure from South Africa, a number of magazines wrote articles about apartheid using many of the photographs she had taken while in South Africa.

In the rest of the book (pp. 61-117) Rick and Alex highlight developments in South Africa in line with such themes as the life of the Afrikaners; the living conditions in the mines; and repression and resistance. It is this section which unveils Margaret Bourke-White’s expertise and prowess in taking photographs.

In a nutshell, based on the professional career of Margaret highlighted in the book, this is the richest photographic section of the book. Alex and Halpern included in this section some of the most popular and frequently cited photographs taken by Margaret in apartheid South Africa. These include photographs of gold miners of Robinson Deep Gold Mine in Johannesburg (see front page and figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3, pages 72-74).

This carefully researched and subtly argued book is a welcome addition to South African historiography, especially on political history and labor history. In short, this photo book which pieces together the story of one of the greatest photojournalists of the twentieth century will, therefore, be of interest to scholars and students interested in these two, and other related, fields.