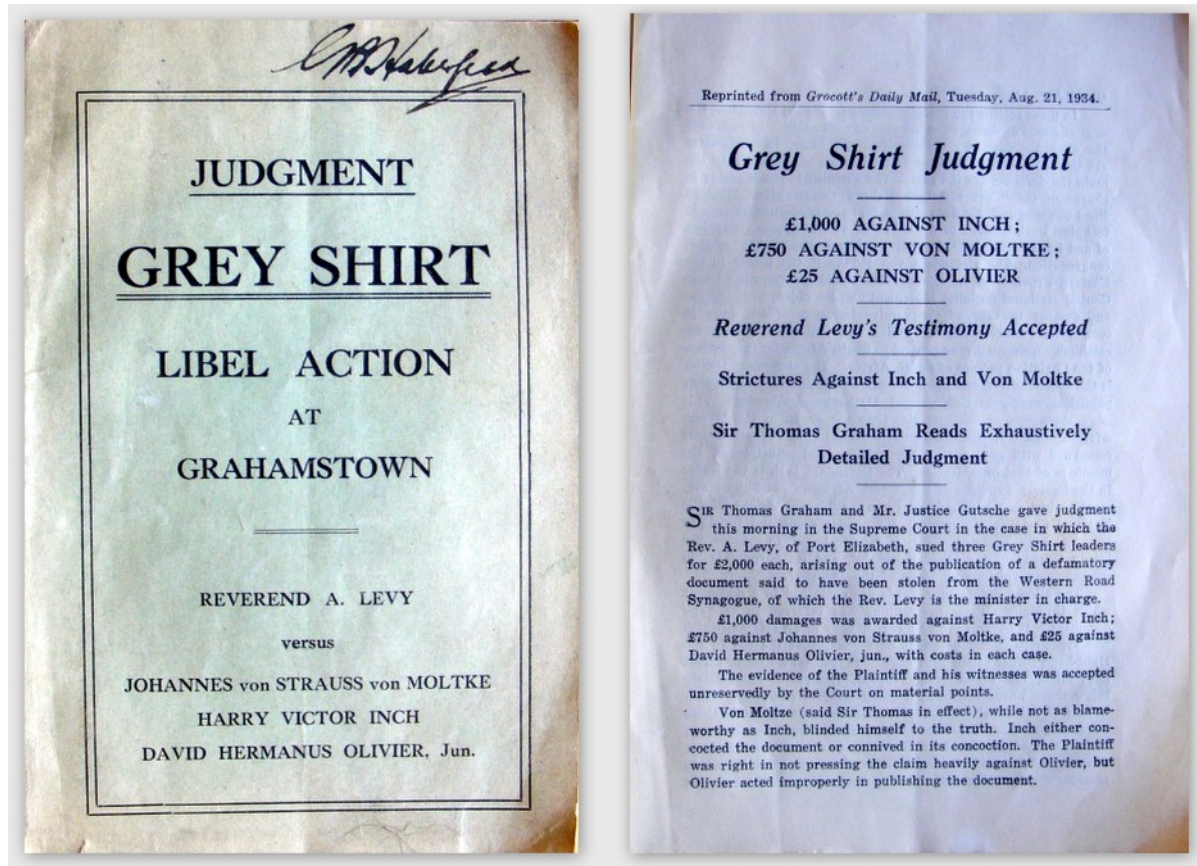


The 1934 Grey-Shirts Libel Trial

In 1934, a major court case—often called the “Grey-Shirts Trial”—was held in Grahamstown, in the Eastern Division of the Supreme Court of South Africa. The case was brought by Reverend Abraham Levy, minister of the Western Road Synagogue in Port Elizabeth, against three leaders of the Grey-Shirts, an anti-Jewish group also known as the South African Gentile National Socialist Movement.



What led to the trial

- In March 1934, at a public meeting in Aberdeen, Eastern Cape, one of the Grey-Shirts' leaders claimed he had “incontrovertible proof” of a secret Jewish plot to overthrow Christianity and Western civilization. He read out what he said were documents stolen from the Western Road Synagogue in Port Elizabeth, supposedly signed by the congregation's rabbi. These documents were a localized version of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.
- The Afrikaans-language newspaper *Die Rapport* published a report of this meeting (including the allegations and the document) on 13 April 1934.

The legal action

- Rev. Levy sued three Grey-Shirt leaders: Johannes von Moltke, Harry Victor Inch, and David Hermanus Olivier (the editor of *Die Rapport*). He claimed defamation/libel arising from the publication and use of these forged documents.
- The trial was heard before Judge-President Sir Thomas Graham and Justice Gutsche.
- A number of people gave testimony, including Nachum Sokolow, a prominent Zionist leader who happened to be visiting South Africa at the time.

Findings and judgment

- The court found that the disputed documents were forgeries, composed by members of the Grey-Shirts (or at least persons associated with them), and that they were published for the purpose of anti-Jewish agitation.
- In particular, messages by the defendants about Jewish plots were held to be false, including stories about how the documents had been obtained (e.g. from theft at the synagogue, or from “boys” outside a hall). The court found these stories to be “phantastic” and without truth.

Penalties and aftermath

- The judgment included fines and other penalties:

Defendant	Offence(s)	Penalty / Fine
Harry Victor Inch	Forgery, perjury (for claiming under oath the documents were genuine), defaming the Jewish race	Fined £1,000, and also given a short prison sentence.
Johannes von Moltke	Playing a leading role in the plot (i.e. propagating the forgeries)	Fined £750.
David Hermanus Olivier	Printing / publishing the forged document	Fined £25.

- Rev. Levy’s suit was widely seen as a complete vindication of the Jewish community in South Africa because the court thoroughly exposed the forgery and rejected the defamatory charges levelled against Jews. A 2017 PhD thesis on the trial by Levy’s granddaughter Lisa Sazrin, titled *Seeking truth and challenging prejudice: confronting race hatred through the South African Greyshirt case of Levy v Von Moltke*, is online at <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/120342/2/02whole.pdf>