

SPEECH DELIVERED BY ALBIE SACHS AT A RALLY HELD IN THE GROUNDS OF
THE E.M. UNIVERSITY IN CONNECTION WITH THE ASSASSINATION OF RUTH

FIRST 23 AUGUST 1982

Comrade Rector of the Eduardo Mondlane University,
Comrades.

A full appreciation of the intellectual contribution of our beloved Comra Ruth First requires a moment more serene than this and a person more skilled in analysis than myself. My words on behalf of the now reduced group of ANC members working at this university, will focus on Comrade Ruth's revolutionary personality. In particular, I will try to answer the question of how it is that someone like Ruth, of a reserved nature, who did not make personal contacts easily, should come to be so dear to her comrades and so loved by the masses; what was the source of the special impact she had, an impact so great that the enemy singled her out for assassination?

Following Ruth's own method, to answer that question, I think we need to look at the contradictions that were part and parcel of her life, contradictions that were a source of growth and strength.

In the first place, Ruth was a woman active in a movement largely dominated by men. It is true that our struggle has a long history of active participation by women - we have had generations of women organisers, many outstanding women trade unionists, some brilliant women orators, but Ruth entered a domain thereto occupied only by men, the domain of theory. It is impossible to convey today the impact that her example had on her own generation and that which immediately followed, that of a young woman who stood up in any company and on any company and on any occasion and argued her points incisively and with confidence. Countless women took inspiration from her, and not only women: she resolved the contradiction of a woman in a man's world by extending the horizons of all of us, men and women almost single handedly changing the conception of a whole movement, in the fine biography which she co-authored, of the outstanding South African novelist, feminist and socialist Oliver Schreiner, she picks up many of the principal themes of women's liberation, especially the question of why such a successful and acclaimed writer and public personality should spend much of her life suffering from a sense of acute discontent and unease, one suspects that Ruth identified in part with her subject, and we must concede that even in a movement as relatively liberated as ours, the story of establishing proper relations between women and men is far from told.

The second manifest contradiction in Ruth's life arose from the fact that she was a person born into the dominant class who identified totally with the people's struggle, with the struggle of the masses. Here one makes the point immediately that never once did she accept that she was making 'sacrifices' for the sake of the struggle. On the contrary, to participate in the struggle was for her an honour and a joy and a source of the greatest fulfilment a human being can have. Further, she never tried to resolve the discrepancy between her class origin and her class option by means of populist gestures or by means of pretending she was poor and humble. Quality and style were not for her necessary enemies in themselves - she stole them from the bourgeoisie to put them at the service of the people. An elegant, cultivated person, she had true respect for the people's struggle, and strove always to contribute to it all her skills and accomplishments.

Ruth was highly productive person, turning out a vast body of material under pressure and often in conditions of great risk, yet one can look back at forty years of her work and not find a single piece of shoddiness, a single item that smacks of routinism, whether an article in the Guardian newspaper, or an underground leaflet, or a conference speech or a major book. Ruth thought freshly about every subject to hand and attended to the concrete details that gave it its special shape and texture. Widely travelled and widely read, a great communicator of our struggle to the world, and of the world's struggle to our people, she imparted the quality of her learning to all her activities. It was not Ruth who was impoverished by the Revolution, it was the Revolution that was enriched by her contribution.

Thirdly, Ruth presented the contradiction of a person of a critical intellectual formation in a strongly disciplined movement. Here, too, the contradiction resolved itself in a manner highly valuable to the struggle. In my view, this was perhaps the area of her greatest contribution, even if the least publicised. When Ruth was around, nothing could simply be taken for granted. She could be severe not only on her enemies but also on her friends, especially when she thought they were lapsing into slogans and triumphalism. By means of her trenchant arguments, her insistence on concrete analysis, she succeeded in raising the level of debate, in seeing to it that fundamental questions were addressed and then answered on the basis of hard evidence. There can be no major document of our struggle of the past thirty years, whether on the nature of the South African state, or the importance of the element of class in the national liberation struggle, or the strategy and tactics of our struggle, or the problems of internal organisation of our movement, that has not been directly or indirectly influenced by Ruth's comments. An active participant in all the great inner debates of our movement, her ideas were taken over, discussed, attacked, accepted, applauded, repudiated, transformed and in a dozen different ways absorbed into the essential texture of the thinking of our struggle. For all the sharpness and individuality of her opinions, Ruth was to the day of her death a totally loyal and disciplined worker for the revolutionary cause, who brought nothing but honour to the two most important organisations in her life, the ANC and the South African Communist Party.

Comrades, by taking Ruth from us in this way, the enemy has reminded the world, if it needed such reminder, that there is no such thing as liberal apartheid as benevolent fascism, that behind any talk about dialogue and reform lies the reality of the bomb. When Ruth's arguments became too compelling, the regime responded by eliminating not her ideas, but Ruth. We have lost a comrade, a colleague, a friend, a sister, a unique person, someone we loved dearly. A materialist from head to toe, I doubt that Ruth would have accepted the statement made by other speakers that her spirit lives on. What lives on is her work, the output of nearly forty years of brilliant thought and inventive struggle. What lives on are her teachings, her vivid style of posing questions, her special way of making us all think harder, not only about the enemy, but about ourselves. But above all what lives on is : us, is the Revolution. There is only one justification for all the suffering, for all the tortures and assassinations, and that is VICTORY. Fascism needs panic. We will not give it to them. Quietly and serenely, we will continue with our work, quietly and serenely we will continue with the Revolution, and quietly and serenely we will acclaim the victory that must be ours.

RUTH FIRST MEMORIAL TRUST

of Ruth First, friend and colleague, who was assassinated in Maputo on 17th August, we intend to create a resource centre to service and support the study of the history, economics and sociology of South Africa and of other countries in southern Africa. The centre will:

- Be particularly concerned to copy and transmit materials concerned with such studies to institutions in Africa, and to make them available to scholars and others who are not affiliated to universities.
- Act as trustee for the papers of Ruth First and other papers and documents donated, lent to, or purchased for, the centre.
- Establish the centre initially at a University or other suitable location in Britain where its collection can be housed safely until circumstances properly permit its transfer to South Africa.
- Organise occasional lectures in the name of Ruth First.
- Provide travel and research grants for suitable candidates to study at the centre.
- Fund suitable projects and, as appropriate, publish their findings.

WHO WAS RUTH FIRST?

In its obituary on 19 August 1982, *The Times* gave a brief description of Ruth's life and work.

Ruth First, who was killed by a letter bomb in Maputo, Mozambique on August 17, was an incisive writer, a practical academic and a creative revolutionary at the heart of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa.

Born in Johannesburg in 1925, she was a daughter of radical socialists who had emigrated from the Baltic states. While studying social science at Witwatersrand University she joined the communist party and founded a multi-racial students group.

During the great African mine strike of 1946 she was among a handful of whites who assisted the strikers and soon after she was appointed Johannesburg editor of radical newspapers – from the *Guardian* to *New Age* – through their successive bannings, and also edited a literary magazine, *Fighting Talk*.

In 1947 despite risk of police harassment, she helped to expose farm labour conditions in Bethal, where Africans lived like slaves. It was typical of her investigative journalism through the 1950s: story after story set out the facts of life as experienced by "non-whites".

In 1949 she married Joe Slovo, an advocate, and they were at the heart of radical opposition while their home became a popular centre for multi-racial gatherings. With their close friends, Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, they were among defendants in the mammoth treason trial of 1956, in which all were eventually acquitted.

During the early 1960s she was banned from journalism, then, in 1963, was arrested and held in solitary confinement for 117 days. On release, she left South Africa. (In a television play based on her book *117 Days*, directed by Jack Gold, she acted herself). Meanwhile Joe Slovo had been sent overseas, eventually to become a member of the Revolutionary Council of the African National Congress.

Settling in Camden Town with her husband and three daughters, Ruth First loved London with its intellectual stimulus and returned there to write and to participate in political activities between terms at Durham University where she lectured in sociology.

Three years ago she went on a year's sabbatical to Mozambique where she was persuaded to remain at the Centre for African Studies at the University to head an international team of academics investigating the lives of migrant labourers, especially miners working in South Africa. Her book, *The Mozambique Miner*, is due to be published.

A brilliant woman, Ruth First did not suffer fools gladly and some regarded her as cold, but in fact she was shy, a private person. Her dedication was lit by warmth, generosity and a sense of humour which deflated pretension and sentimentality. Among her books are *South-west Africa*, *The Barrel of a Gun*, (a study of coups in Africa), and, with co-author Ann Scott, a highly praised biography of Olive Schreiner.



AN APPEAL

THE RUTH FIRST MEMORIAL

To this we add our more personal recollections

Ruth was a unique friend, with a strong sense of fun – honest, humorous, brave, modest and compassionate, impatient and with a striking vitality. These qualities made her book, *117 Days*, one of the best prison books to come out of any country.

She was always learning. She loved ideas, but not for themselves: they were precious and necessary as instruments in the process of liberation. Ideas were for Ruth continually subject to re-examination or reinforcement in the light of what she saw and learnt. Her thought was constantly enriched by her experience.

As a result, she was a superb teacher. For her, academic study and research served not as a one-way street to a safe and separate world but as a straight road between intellect and action, between knowledge and change. Questions had to be asked, evidence collected, the issues argued through, then the findings and ideas communicated to others.

It is these elements from her life-work that we particularly want to propagate through the Trust.

Contributing to the Trust

We are confident that we shall have wide international support for our venture. Ruth was highly respected not only in much of Africa but at the United Nations, in Britain, in Scandinavia and America, and also in Italy, where she was a Vice-President of the Lega di Diretti dei Popoli.

We have applied for charitable status for the Trust. Meanwhile, donations should be sent to:

**Ruth First Memorial Trust
c/o Ronald Segal
Old Manor House
Manor Road
Walton-on-Thames
Surrey, England.**

Trustees:

Rosalynde Ainslie
Ruth Mompoti
Ronald Segal
Joe Slovo
Gavin Williams
Harold Wolpe

"I lived in a woman's hostel where most of the women had children. Many could barely sleep worrying about where their children were staying - with strangers or old grannies - paying out most of their money so their children could survive. Still they could not see them. This experience turned me round If the government had set out to create a society that would consume itself, it couldn't have done better. It has destroyed our family life, left the homelands fatherless with mothers struggling to help the remains of their family survive. Either the women must go mad or revolt."

"If you were to ask the enlightened black woman what her priorities are, she wouldn't say women's liberation. She would say freedom, freedom."

- Thenjie Mtintso

Hilda Bernstein

A sensational journalistic exposé of thirty years ago links the name of Ruth First, murdered last week ^{in Maputo} by a letter bomb with that of Joe Gqabi, murdered last year in Harare. Both exiled South Africans, both leading members of the African National Congress.

Ruth was the Johannesburg editor of the radical weekly Guardian when Joe Gqabi joined the staff. Together they made headlines with stories of the Bethal potato fields.

Bethal is a prosperous farming area in the Eastern Transvaal. The wealthy white farmers, perennially short of black labour, had come to a rewarding arrangement with the authorities. They brought their trucks, fitted with wire cages, to the Magistrate's Court in Johannesburg and loaded them up with 'short-term' black prisoners convicted of ^{minor} small pass or tax offences. Once on the farms, stripped of clothes, imprisoned in hovel compounds, ~~flashed~~ at night, flogged in the fields during the day, there was no escape. Often the short-termer became a permanent slave labourer.

Nobody had written about it, nobody knew about it. But ^{many} people took their stories to Ruth and the Guardian and her investigations made national headlines.

Crusading journalism? But it was more than that. It was part of the continuous political struggle in which Ruth was involved from student days, and which took her into the Communist Party and a leading role in the liberatory movement. Politics and journalism were one. The articles on the Bethal potato farms led ^{directly} to a months-long boycott of potatoes, organised by Congress Alliance, headed by the ANC. Sacks of potatoes piled up and rotted at the wholesale market at Newtown. Our children nagged unsuccessfully for packets of crisps.

Politics, work, all aspects of life, were inextricably woven together. How odd it sounds to South Africans to hear people say 'Keep ~~xxx~~ politics out of sport'. In South Africa everything is political - home life, work, schools, holidays, recreation. A party at ~~Ruth's home in 1961: she is married to a lawyer, Joe Slovo.~~ The party celebrates the end of the 4½-year long Treason Trial in which Ruth and Joe were two of the 156 defendants, all acquitted. Midnight, a large and noisy gathering of former accused and families. Suddenly men leap through the open windows,

the home of Ruth and her lawyer husband, Joe Slovo

flash bulbs flaring, while police charge through the doors. They could never leave us alone; it was illegal to serve alcohol to blacks even in your own home; they hoped to catch us in the act.

A braaivleis (barbecue) in the Slovo's garden. A Greek-born lawyer is supervising the roasting of a whole sheep over glowing coals. Beautiful food, drink, sunshine; but the purpose is to raise funds to support the monthly radical/literary magazine, Fighting Talk, that Ruth edits. *political*

The Slovos and their three daughters were used to the men whose heavy boots scarred their parquet floors; the periodic raids and searches that emptied bookshelves. I know; it was the same for us. Once they took more than 600 books from our house in a day-long raid, meticulously listed ^{together} with typewriters and children's scribblings, but never returned.

I met Ruth secretly in 1960 during the five-month long State of Emergency following the Sharpeville shootings. With many others I had been in jail, but Ruth and a handful of people had escaped over the border into Swaziland. She had returned to work underground before the Emergency ended, her hair dyed red as part of her disguise. 'I always wanted red hair,' she said. Her own black hair suited her better.

She was a beautiful woman. She dressed well, had excellent and expensive tastes. For a while South Africa allowed white radicals to lead ^{such} double lives. Ruth's tremendous intelligence was enriched during those crowded, exciting years of intense political activities. It came to an end in 1961, after the passing of a 90-day law permitting indefinite ^{jailing} ~~xxxxx~~ without charges.

Ruth ^{been associated with} had known Nelson Mandela since their student days. She was deeply involved with the group arrested at a place called Rivonia. *for which Mandela was sub. jailed for life* She was not there when the arrests took place, but was subsequently arrested and held for 90 days, released and re-arrested. She wrote about it in ~~xxx~~ her book, '117 Days', and later, in England, played herself in a TV film made by Jack Gould. She went to the brink of breakdown and attempted suicide. These depths were reached only when she became convinced that her friends would think she had betrayed them. But she recovered her resilience, her humour. The book, with its revealing incidents, is sparked with her vivacity and courage, yet also betrays the innate shyness and reticence that her forthright manner tended to conceal. She writes of the ambivalent relationship that grew up between her and the interrogator, Viktor, but does not really examine it. 'I was practicing deceit, but searching myself not
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She continued to participate in ANC and anti-apartheid activities, both locally and internationally.

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so productive

ends

HILDA BERNSTEIN remembers murdered South African Ruth First Exile to the life

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She writes of the ambivalent relations that grew up between her and the interrogator, Viktor, but does not really examine it. "I was practising deceit, but searching myself not to make it self-deception."

Some people found her intimidating: she had a sharp tongue and was impatient of fools, and often seemed short-tempered; but the temper and impatience arose from her own clarity of thought, an ability to cut through to the heart of any problem.

Ruth went into exile when it was obvious she would be arrested again: the Rivonia trial was proceeding, Mandela and the others would receive life imprisonment.

The next batch would soon be rounded up: as banned people we were prohibited from communicating with one another, but I went to the airport when she left and we exchanged last hugs in the women's lavatory, the only place where the men of the Special Branch hesitated to come.

Everything came together at Maputo. She headed an international team as research director at the centre for African studies, and drew on all her rich past to help initiate plans for the new country's needs, projects that would be viable both from an economic and a social/political standpoint. Her first study on the Mozambique miner is due for publication.

She worked and lectured, part of a team with others, never simply as an outstanding individual. She continued to participate in ANC and anti-apartheid activities, both locally and internationally.

Such a combination of high intellect and rich practical achievement is rare in our world. Her life had never been so full, so productive; she was happy: they had to kill her.

Guardian

**AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS
RUTH FIRST MEMORIAL
MEETING**



**HAMPSTEAD
TOWN HALL NW3
WED 8th SEPT**

6.30 pm

**SPEAKERS FROM;
ANC, SWAPO, AAM,
PLUS TRIBUTES FROM
FORMER COLLEGUES
A LUTA CONTINUA**

DON'T MOURN! MOBILISE!

Silenced — a powerful voice against apartheid



The letter bomb that killed Ruth First in Maputo was one of two that had arrived at the Centre for African Studies. The second was addressed to Aquino de Braganca, director of the centre.

Ruth had gone to her office together with the director and two other delegates to a Unesco seminar. Standing by the window, she began to look through the letters. Aquino de Braganca remarked on the size of the post. "I don't get any letters," he said. "Here's one for you," Ruth replied, and handed it to him. Then she slit open her letter.

* * *

Ruth's parents, Julius and Tillie First, were in a wave of early settlers who came to the mining camp of Johannesburg from the Baltic states. They brought with them strong Marxist beliefs. They were among the activists who formed the first communist party in Africa, the Communist Party of South Africa, in 1921.

Immersed in radical politics, Ruth joined the Junior Left Book Club as a schoolgirl; as a student at the Witwatersrand University 40 years ago she helped found an organisation of progressive students.

Ruth became Johannesburg editor of the radical weekly *Guardian* whose editor, in Cape Town, was Brian Bunting. He records how, with her energy and enthusiasm, she turned in a remarkable series of reports over the years that exposed the cruelties and scandals of the pass laws, the courts and labour system.

Dark-eyed, attractive, possessed of a youthful energy that lasted all her life, Ruth was an investigative journalist of top calibre. She was equally dedicated in the activities of the Communist Party, with its total opposition to racist discrimination and its demand of votes for all.

The Communist Party was made illegal in 1950, and the *Guardian* was suppressed the following year. It re-appeared in many different guises, ending as *New Age*, which appeared until the state found that by prohibiting everyone who worked on the paper from writing or having anything to do with publication, they could destroy the paper more effectively. While *New Age* lasted it became the mouthpiece of the Congress movement during a period of tremendous political activity in the 1950s.

The Congress Alliance welded together the African National Congress, the Indian

Congress, coloureds and trade unionists, and a small number of white radicals. Its campaigns drew in thousands. In the ANC itself, the older, more traditional leadership was yielding to the young militants, among them Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. A huge Congress of the People in 1956 hammered out the Freedom Charter, still the basis of ANC policy.

In December 1956 the state responded, and in 1956 political leaders including Ruth and her lawyer husband Joe Slovo were arrested and charged with treason. After a 4½ year treason trial all the accused were acquitted in 1961.

When banning restrictions became more severe, confining people to limited areas or putting them under house arrest, the era of social intermingling between the races came to an end. Banned people were prohibited from communicating with other banned people, and we were all banned.

Ruth's home was always open to her friends, and they included ANC militants, Indians Congress members, visiting writers.

In 1960, after the shootings at Sharpeville, Joe was among those detained in the five months state of emergency. Ruth, with a few others had managed to slip across the border into Swaziland, but returned in disguise before the end of the emergency to work underground.

With the passing of the 90-day detention law (later to become the 180-day law, then the Terrorism Act) permitting indefinite detention without trial or access to anyone, the police Special Branch had at last the weapon they wanted: the licence to torture, that has led to more than 50 deaths in detention. It also led to the betrayal of the underground hide-out at Rivonia, near Johannesburg. Ruth was not there when the raid took place, but she was closely associated with the arrested group. She was subsequently detained for 117 days, an experience she examined with courage in the book she wrote.

Ruth went into exile when it was obvious she was to be re-arrested.

I went to Jan Smuts Airport near Johannesburg to see her off. The Special Branch were there, and because we were prohibited from communicating, we sat apart. Finally we exchanged hugs in the ladies' lavatory, the only place they hesitated to follow us.

Ruth found the rich cultural and intellectual life of London tremendously stimulating. She contributed to seminars

and conferences on apartheid, presented papers in various countries and continued to write.

Her work remains remarkably relevant, even her first book on Namibia in 1963. *The Barrel of a Gun*, a study of political power and the *cout d'état* in Africa, appeared in 1970 after years of extensive research. *The South African Connection* (1972) was written with Jonathan Steele and Christabel Gurney. She was midwife to two other books: a biography of Kenya opposition leader Oginga Odinga and *South Africa: the Peasants' Revolt* by Govan Mbeki. Her book about present day Libya was subtitled *The Elusive Revolution*. Her last book, with Ann Scott, was a departure — a biography of the South African writer Olive Schreiner.

Her activities and experience bore rich fruit in her work as research director at the Centre for African Studies in Mozambique. She directed several important projects. A book about the first, *The Mozambique Miner*, is due for publication. At the same time she continued to contribute to the struggle against apartheid, both locally in the ANC and internationally.

There is one word that describes Ruth First: brilliant. Brian Bunting writes: "She was struck down when the stream of her talent was flowing at full spate."

Mary Benson summed her up: "An incisive writer, a practical academic and a creative revolutionary at the head of the liberation struggle in South Africa."

Everything in Ruth's life was directed towards the liberation of her country.

She was quick in all things, sharp-tongued, impatient of fools, easily bored. I often observed her taking a cat-nap at social events when her interest flagged.

Her work revealed to the world how the future of Southern Africa, and countries further to the north, hinges on the destruction of apartheid. She was among the growing number of apartheid's opponents on South Africa's hit list — one more sign, wrote Jonathan Steele, of South Africa's creeping intervention in every one of the black-ruled states on its borders.

In *The Barrel of a Gun*, Ruth wrote: "Harsh judgments are made in this book of Africa's independence leaderships. Yet this book is primarily directed not to criticism, but to the liberation of Africa, for I count myself an African, and there is no cause I hold dearer."

Her life was given for that.

Hilda Bernstein

Ruth First

1925 - 1982



Activist and Academic

A terrorist letter-bomb exploded at the University in Maputo last Tuesday and killed Ruth First. Several other staff-members were injured in the blast. They included Aquino de Braganca, a top Frelimo adviser and director of the Centre for African Studies and Bridgit O'Laughlin who teaches at the centre. Also injured was Paulo Jordan, a visiting academic.

The bomb was in a letter addressed to Ruth First. It was she who opened it and was subjected to the full force of the explosion. She died instantly. Ruth First was an outstanding scholar who integrated her academic work with the struggle for political and economic change in Southern Africa.

It is impossible to write an adequate obituary of Ruth First from South Africa. As a journalist, political activist and academic, words were the tools of her trade. But no one in South Africa may legally read anything she wrote or quote anything she said.

Her life had two phases: The first, one of political activity and journalism inside South Africa, the second, one of exile and academic dedication. Both phases were linked by her deep concern for the total liberation of Africa and both bore the mark of her commitment to this cause.

Ruth First was born and bred in the radical tradition. Her parents, who were Jewish immigrants from the Baltic states, had been members of the International Socialist League in the 1920s. She grew up in a home in which radical opposition to the colour-bar was strong. In 1942 she began studies at the University of the Witwatersrand and helped to found the left-wing group the Progressive Youth Council, which attracted a small number of black students. She experienced little success in recruiting African students who were increasingly engaged in the African National Congress Youth League and she quickly saw the necessity for open involvement in the established

graduating she became a Research Officer in Johannesburg, teaching politics in the evenings at night schools and taking an active part in the work of the Communist Party which she had joined.

The Party was very involved in the organisation of the African Mine Workers Union. When the 1946 strike broke out, "Ruth threw herself into the struggle. In the middle of the night she drove the African strike organisers to the compounds, dodging the police, to climb over walls and scatter leaflets giving news of the other strikers."

When the Smuts government attempted to paralyse the Com

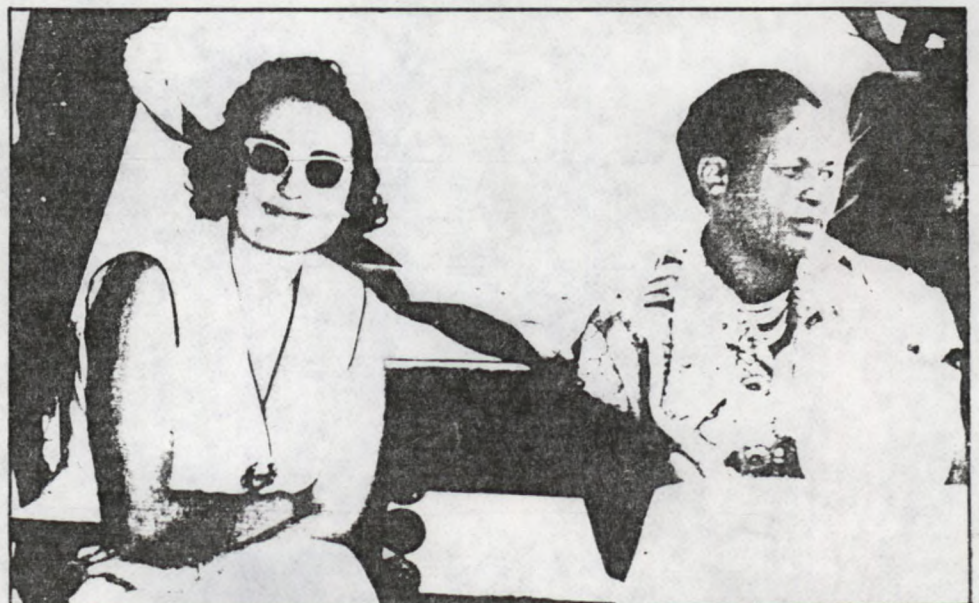
When the Smuts government attempted to paralyse the Communist Party by arresting its top leadership after the defeat of the strike, she served temporarily as secretary of the Johannesburg office. Shortly afterwards, she became the local editor of the Guardian, helping to make it and its successor publications effective mouthpieces of the forces that identified with the liberation struggle.

An active organiser in the Communist Party, she steadily drew closer to African nationalism. In 1950, the SACP was declared illegal and she was one of the first to be 'listed' under the Suppression of Communism Act. (At this stage a listed person could not stand for election to parliament and could be

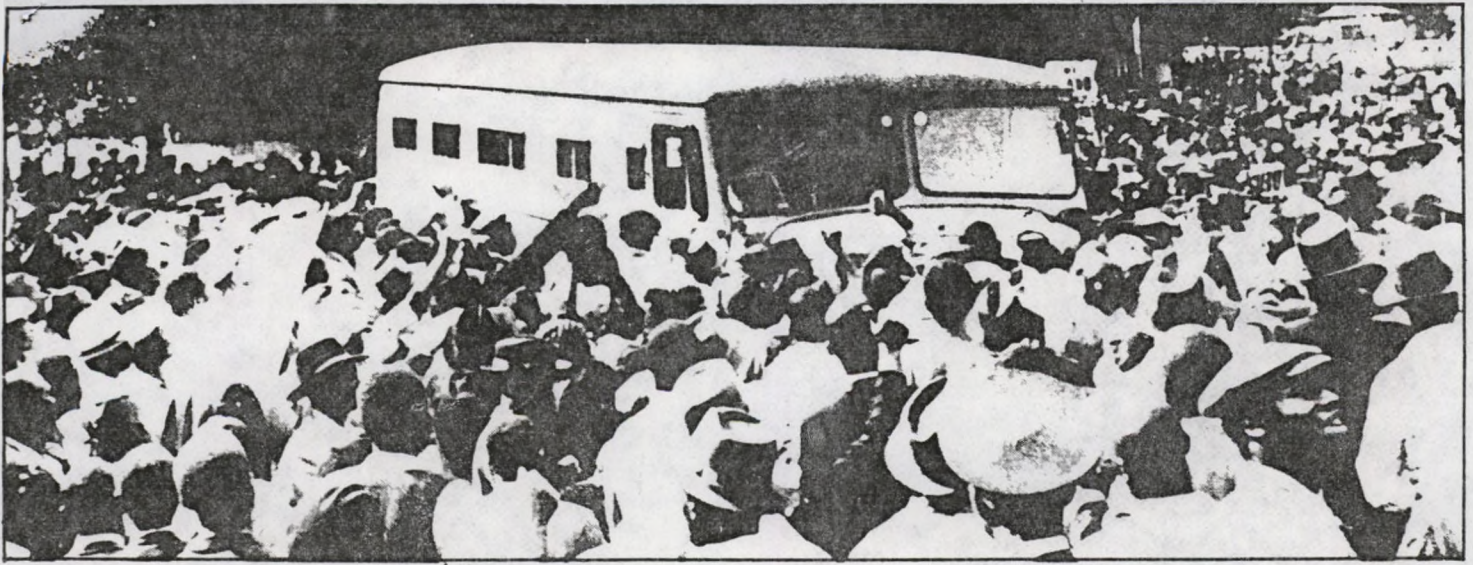
forced to resign from named organisation — only later was the Act changed to stop listed people even being quoted.)

In 1953 Ruth First helped to found the Congress of Democrats, the white wing of the Congress Alliance but was then banned under the Suppression of Communism Act and forced to abandon her membership of all political organisations. Her house was frequently raided by the Security Police and, along with many other supporters of the Congress Alliance she was subjected to other forms of state harassment. These reached a climax in 1956 when she was one of 156 South Africans of all races arrested for High Treason. Some of the accused had their lives disrupted for four and a half years by tedious court appearances. Not one of the treason trialists was found guilty. The charge against Ruth First was withdrawn in 1958 — before the trial had ended — and she returned full-time to journalism

The charge against Ruth First was withdrawn in 1958 — before the trial had ended — and she returned full-time to journalism. She was then the editor of the monthly magazine Fighting Talk. This had been the organ of the radical ex-servicemen's Springbok Legion, but was taken over by an independent committee when the Legion became defunct. It consisted mainly of comment on current affairs and was strong in its support for the Congress Alliance.



Ruth First (left) and Albertina Sisulu on the platform at a mass meeting on Human



The treason trialists are welcomed at the Drill Hall where the trial was held

In 1960 the government declared a state of emergency after the Sharpeville shootings. Opponents of Apartheid all over the country were summarily arrested and held in detention. These included Joe Slovo who Ruth First had married in 1949, but she escaped to Swaziland. After the emergency, she returned to the work she had been doing before. In 1963 she was arrested and held in solitary confinement under the new 90 day detention law. On her release in 1964 both she and her husband were banned and house arrested. They left South Africa for exile.

Ruth First spent several months in Kenya assisting Oginga Odinga with his memoirs. She edited the autobiography and shaped its final form as *No Yet Uhuru*.

Living in England, she wrote a book on her experiences in prison (117 days) and edited the autobiography of Nelson Mandela — *No Easy Walk to Freedom* — which was published while he served his life sentence on Robben Island.

Ruth First became drawn into academic pursuits — but these remained closely linked with her interest in Africa and its liberation from oppression by foreign or indigenous elites. She wrote *The Barrel of a Gun* — an attempt to explain why newly independent African states were so vulnerable to military coup d'état. This remains one of the best works on this subject. She worked with others in preparing detailed exposés of foreign investors in SA and the complicity of 'the West' in shoring up Apartheid. She published books, pamphlets and articles on Namibia, Libya and Portugal in Africa.

department of sociology at Durham University. During this period she worked with Ann Scott on their definitive biography of Olive Schreiner. In 1977 she took up a post to teach economics and politics at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique. As research director of the university's Centre for African Studies (CEA) she played a leading role in preparing training programmes for Frelimo party cadres (including one on the history of SA) and expanding the universities function of educating working people in the evenings.

Research projects were geared to meet the needs of Mozambican policy makers and planners. Ruth First co-ordinated a monumental study of the effects of labour migration to South Africa on the Mozambican economy. Its purpose was

"to collect and analyse evidence on the extent and effects of mine labour in order that this system can be more effectively combated by a socialist alternative. FRELIMO is engaged in the reconstruction of the Mozambican economy and society in order to lay the basis for the social organisation of production. These tasks include of necessity the ending of the system of migrant labour and its export outside the country. The system of migrant labour which was entrenched over many decades poses important and immediate questions for the destruction of the colonial economy and the formation of a socialist society. In other words, it is a central problem of the transition period."

The project involved interviewing

to their farms and villages. A comprehensive report was published as *The Mozambican Miner* in 1977. The report stressed the serious consequences which would flow from any sudden end to mine labour. Since 1897 Southern Mozambique had provided a fairly constant figure of 100 000 workers per year for the mines. Migrant labour had become entrenched in the rural economy. Even successful peasant families relied on mine income to pay bride prices and to buy livestock, building materials and capital equipment to raise productivity. The decision of the mining houses to cut back drastically on recruitment from Mozambique was foreseen and suggestions were made regarding the absorption of previously exported labour into the national economy.

Another research project undertaken by the research unit concerned the restructuring of Mozambique's cotton industry. It is with problems such as these that the Centre for African Studies at Maputo is concerned. It is testimony to Ruth First's academic standing that she should have been appointed director of such a research unit.

Her cruel assassination deprives the people of Mozambique, of Southern Africa, of Africa, of a committed friend. The liberation movement has lost an academic who was not content merely to theorise the process of social change — she inserted herself into that process. But Ruth First leaves a legacy of solid academic work, a purposeful research unit and an example to teachers, researchers and students of how to combine their intellectual labour with political commit-

Exposing Farm Slavery

"New Age gave a picture of South Africa so totally different to that provided by the European press that it was hard to believe they were describing the same country."
— Anthony Sampson, former editor of Drum

The fore-runner of New Age, the Guardian was first published in Cape Town in 1937. It was an independent left-wing newspaper which aimed to expose the evils of white supremacy and publicize the demands and aspirations of the masses for a better South Africa. Before and during World War II, the paper was uncompromising in its opposition to Fascism, which it saw as the chief enemy of working people all over the world.

In 1946, during the African mine-workers strike on the Rand, the Guardian had its first taste of overt state suppression when it experienced extensive police raids. In protest, one edition appeared with two pages blank. As the National Party assumed power and life became increasingly intolerable for three quarters of the nation, so the importance of the Guardian as a voice of resistance grew. It began to expose the brutalities and viciousness of Apartheid as no other publication could or would.

The finest examples of this work were the "Bethal exposés". Ruth First, by now editor of the paper, Michael Scott and Gert Sibande brought to light the system whereby prisoners, pass offenders and other unfortunates were forced or tricked into employment on farms and there subjected to the most brutal treatment. Flogging, assault and murder were part of the everyday reality of these workers. The fearless reporting of the Guardian helped to make the name of Bethal notorious as 'the flogging district'.

At the same time, the Guardian threw its weight behind those organisations in the forefront of resistance to Apartheid, which came to form the Congress Movement. These two factors caused the government to ban it in 1952 on the eve of the Defiance Campaign

ANC. A prominent participant in the Campaign has observed that had the Guardian ceased to exist then, the Campaign would have suffered a crippling blow. But in a display of courage and resourcefulness, a new paper emerged the very next week — The Clarion — with the same subscribers, readers, policy, staff and editor — Ruth First.

When The Clarion, too, was banned the Peoples World took its place, to be followed in its turn by Advance, and then New Age. New Age represented the high point in progressive journalism in South Africa — a paper which openly and unreservedly supported the Congress Movement and the most militant demands of the oppressed majority. The Freedom Charter, the Congress of the People, the Treason Trial, the Pound-a-day Campaign, the Potato and bus boycotts — all the great events of the time were recorded in its pages. Its circulation reached a peak of 60 000 copies a week.

In keeping with the non-racial character of the Congress Movement, progressive journalists of all races worked on the paper. One of Ruth First's close associates in this period was Joe Gqabi, the ANC

leader assassinated by 'unknown killers' in Zimbabwe last year.

Despite the indictment of the majority of its staff on charges of high treason, New Age continued to function throughout the fifties and even into the sixties, after the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the ANC and the PAC. It was finally banned on 30 November 1962, only to be replaced by Spark, which was also banned shortly afterwards.

The government, determined to silence all forms of popular opposition, introduced legislation making it impossible for a banned newspaper simply to continue publishing under a different name. This law and government repression of radical journalists finally killed the line of papers that began with the Guardian.

Ruth First was a pioneer of the committed, principled journalism represented by these newspapers. Persistent in her investigative work, uncompromising in her support for the democratic goals of the Congress Movement, her work lives on as an indelible part of the South African struggle.



SOME BOOKS AND ARTICLES WRITTEN BY RUTH FIRST

- South West Africa: Travesty of Trust (with Ronald Segal) (Andre Deutsch) 117 Days (Penguin)
- The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'Etat (Allen Lane 1970)
- Portugal's Wars in Africa (IDAF 1971)
- The South African Connection: Western Investment in Apartheid (with Jonathan Steele and Christobel Gurney) (Temple Smith 1972)
- Libya: The Elusive Revolution (Penguin 1975)
- "After Soweto: A Response" Review of African Political Economy 11 Jan/ April 1978
- Olive Schreiner (with Ann Scott) (Andre Deutsch 1980)

Ruth First edited No Easy Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela, and Not Yet Uhuru, Oginga Qdinga

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