

Ruth First — author, academic and revolutionary

RUTH FIRST, murdered by a letter-bomb in Maputo on August 17, was one of the South African freedom movement's most respected and prestigious figures. A lifetime's commitment to the liberation struggle earned her the love of her oppressed compatriots, while brilliance as an academic, journalist and author won her the esteem of the international community.

Her death brought grief to thousands — from the black masses of South Africa, whose cause she so tirelessly and courageously championed, to the politicians, scholars and journalists from many countries with whom she had worked.

There is little doubt about the identity of her assassins. The African National Congress of South Africa, which Ruth had served so well, merely gave voice to what we all knew when it accused the Pretoria regime of this act of cold-blooded murder.

Despite her involvement with the ANC, Ruth First had no involvement in any military activity. She was director of research at the Centre of African Studies in Maputo's Eduardo Mondlane University. Her husband, South African militant, Joe Slovo, tells of how she pored over her academic research papers at home until the small hours of the morning, often working a 15-hour day.

Under the expert guidance of Ruth and her chief, Aquino de Braganca, the Centre carried out a series of studies into the rural economy of Mozambique, problems of transition to socialism, and questions related to the advance of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference, SADCC. Given the Pretoria regime's determination to wreck the SADCC alliance, it was natural that Ruth's incisive powers of analysis were used in the study of South Africa itself. The Centre produced many papers on aspects of Pretoria's domestic and foreign policies.

The murder is a blow to the Centre but not as severe as her killers would have liked. Her colleagues say the Centre is now well-enough established through her work to withstand the loss. Director Braganca and American lecturer and researcher, Bridget O'Laughlin, both wounded in the blast that killed Ruth, spoke of their determination to keep up the work.

Ruth First's contribution to Africa's struggle for economic and political liberation began many years before she arrived in Maputo. She joined the South African Communist Party as student at the University of Witwatersrand, and after the 1946 mine strike, when party leaders were arrested, she temporarily became secretary of the Johannesburg party office. She was 21.

She began a journalistic career as the Johannesburg editor of the left-wing paper, *The Guardian*, later *New Age*. When the



paper was banned in 1962, its successor, *Spark*, was set up. But in 1963 the entire staff of the paper were banned.

Ruth married Joe Slovo in 1949. In 1955, she played an important role in Congress of the People at Kliptown, which drew up the fundamental document of the ANC, and its partners in the Congress Alliance, the Freedom Charter. Both Ruth and Joe were among the 156 defendants in the Treason Trial which lasted from 1956 to 1961, and resulted in defeat for the regime which was unable to secure convictions.

In 1963 she was arrested and held in solitary confinement for 117 days under the 90-day detention law. On her release in 1964 she left South Africa and settled in Britain,

A gallant fighter falls

Ruth First was buried in Maputo on 22 August. A close comrade and fellow South African, Albic Sachs, reports:

This morning, under a warm late-winter sky, a thousand people filed past the grave of our late comrade, colleague and friend Ruth First, assassinated in her office by the South African security services.

The ANC choir in the background sang freedom songs, in which the names of Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela and others appeared prominently, and members of Ruth's family. Prominent party and government leaders from Mozambique, ANC leaders and others dropped red carnations and handfuls of sand on the coffin containing the blasted remains of one of the most noted revolutionary intellectuals and social scientists thrown up by the struggle in Southern Africa in recent decades.

Since her days as a militant student at Wits in the 1940s, and until her death, Ruth was

where she worked as a journalist and author.

She threw herself into political activity in Britain and was elected a member of the national committee and the executive committee of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement. She was a brilliant and indefatigable public speaker, addressing anti-apartheid meetings in Britain.

Ruth was granted a year's research fellowship at Manchester University from 1972–73. She was then appointed a lecturer in sociology at Durham University, where she worked from 1973 to 1978. During this period, she was also a visiting lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam.

In December 1978, Ruth went to Maputo to take up the post of Director of Research at the Centre.

Ruth First was a skilled and prolific writer. Her best-known books include *117 Days*, an account of her imprisonment in South Africa, *South West Africa*, a study of South African colonial rule in Namibia, *The Barrel of a Gun*, about military rule in Africa, and *Olive Schreiner*, a biography of the South African feminist author. Due to be published this year is *Black Gold*, which Ruth co-authored with her colleagues in Maputo, about migrant labour in the South African mines.

She has left a deep impression on Mozambicans. After her death, President Samora Machel said: "Her example will inspire, still more, the South African people. They will transform their sorrow and mourning into an immense force for the destruction of the Nazi-fascist regime of Pretoria." □

part of a generation that planned, participated in, wrote about and suffered for all the great political campaigns of our country. To those of a younger generation, she was a source of special admiration and love, a woman who spoke on questions of theory, strategy and tactics with the authority normally appropriated by men; a brave worker in the underground, a cultivated and brilliant person who hated fuss and undue ceremony, and yet who never found it necessary to stoop to populist gestures to prove she was part of the mass struggle.

Comrade Ruth, as she was known in thousands of homes, farms, factories, offices and locations in South Africa, lies buried alongside the 13 other ANC members assassinated in the raid on Matola last year. The revolution forges a new South African people that knows no distinction of race, age or sex and a liberated new nation of the living energies from the nation of the fallen. □