

## 'No Cracking Point'

With a cowardly letter bomb, South Africa's secret assassination squads have murdered Ruth First, the liberation fighter who the regime's torturers could not break. When she was exiled in London in the early '60s, she awakened many thousands to apartheid's brutality by her account of how racist interrogators had callously set out to fulfil their boast that 'every one cracks sooner or later.' They failed then. But on Tuesday other racist thugs took their revenge. As she opened an envelope, a violent explosion ripped through her office in the Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique's capital Maputo where she was director of research at the Centre of African Studies. The attack is similar in nature to others carried out in the region and which were proved to be the work of the South African secret service. The attack on Ruth First followed the murder or attempted murder of leading members and representatives of the African National Congress in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zambia and Britain. The Maputo university where she was murdered was named after another great leader of Africa's liberation movement, Eduardo Mondlane who was murdered in similar circumstances by a parcel bomb in Tanzania's capital of Dar-es-Salaam in February 1969.

Born in Johannesburg, Ruth First, as a student of social science at Witwatersrand University was among the handful of whites who helped the African Mineworkers' Union to organise the great strike of 1946. Evading the police with extraordinary courage, she would drive African union workers late at night out to the mine compounds, help to distribute leaflets and return to the city for the next round. The strike was violently crushed by the authorities and when they arrested the entire local committee of the Communist Party, Ruth became its acting secretary and for 17 years subsequently she played an outstanding part as a journalist in exposing the evils of apartheid. On the journal New Age and other newspapers she helped disclose the scandal of the neo-slavery of the Bethal farms and became an authority

on African labour conditions, in the mines and in the towns and in the rural areas as well.

Her husband Joe Slovo was at the same time playing an outstanding part as a lawyer defending the victims of apartheid. After working on the Guardian, Clarion and New Age, she was editor for nine years of the magazine Fighting Talk and was, with her husband, among the 156 arrested people accused in the notorious treason trial staged by the apartheid regime in 1958 and acquitted when the trial ended in 1961. Ruth was again arrested in Johannesburg in August 1963. After 117 days in solitary confinement she was expelled from her native land by the regime and came with her children to London where they lived for some years and where she played an outstanding part in the Anti-Apartheid movement, continuing her freedom fight for her country. Her scaring account of the psychological torture to which she was subjected during those 117 days was told in a Penguin which brought the reality of the regime home to tens of thousands of people. In 1966 Ruth agreed to re-live those harrowing hours and days in a television programme which gave some idea of how she had withstood the mental torture of her Gestapo-type interrogation. 'Everyone cracks sooner or later,' one of the police thugs interrogating her boasted one day. 'It's our job to find the cracking point. We'll find yours too.' But they never found Ruth First's, maybe because she didn't have one. Then they played cat-and-mouse with her, with the calculated cruelty of telling her she was going to be released. At one stage she was actually on the way out of prison and going to telephone her family, when a detective stepped up to her and said: 'Just a minute ... another period of 90 days.' It was during the period that followed that she went through her fiercest ordeal, but she fought back. The full story of that fight will one day be told in all its heroism, the story of a comrade who loved life, whose humour never failed in the direst of situations, whose whole life was devoted to the cause of Africa's freedom.

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