

# Why South Africa had to kill Ruth First

Was Ruth First murdered because of her position in the African National Congress? JOSEPH HANLON, in Maputo, argues that South Africa felt equally threatened by her other work

**T**he murder of Ruth First in Maputo last week is a harsh reminder that the apartheid regime considers intellectuals as legitimate targets. Most British academics would find it hard to believe they could ever do anything important enough to be killed for. Thus many must accept the explanation of the BBC Johannesburg correspondent that Ruth was killed because she had been helping to direct African National Congress (ANC) actions inside South Africa.

But the South Africans had often made it clear that they felt equally threatened by what Ms First was really doing. The Botha government says it must respond to a 'total onslaught' of military, economic, political, and ideological action. As one of the region's most prominent intellectuals, Ruth played a key role in organising and encouraging a co-ordinated response by the majority-ruled states of the region.

Ruth was Research Director of the Centre for African Studies of Eduardo Mondlane University. She was killed in her office by a letter bomb just three days after the end of a UNESCO sponsored conference at the Centre had brought together progressive researchers from the region. The bomb serves as a clear warning to those who attended that if their work is effective, they too will be targets.

In her four years in Mozambique, Ruth First did what most academics on the left only dream of: she created a centre of activist research helping to transform a society. 'In the context of Mozambique,' she wrote recently, 'social research must play an immediate and active role in the process of socialist transformation. There is often too little time for extended study, for decisions must be taken immediately. When one writes up research results, one attends not to the latest state of theoretical debate on the issue, but rather to the language and expectations of the people working to implement the Frelimo line in concrete situations.'

Research is only done on topics which the Centre feels need studying, and where a government ministry or agency actually wants to know the answer and is prepared to commission the study. Nothing is done for 'academic interest'. International academic journals are never a target of the Centre's research. But it still draws on recent developments in Marxist theory. Indeed, it argues that the development of



Ruth First arriving in London, 1964

theory is not a separate activity, but one that can come only from practical research.

The stress on immediacy and audience grew out of Ms First's nearly 20 years as a journalist and editor in South Africa. The Centre often felt more like a newspaper than an academic department. One researcher called it 'a group of very good Marxist academics driven on by an excellent investigative journalist'. Like a good editor, she broke research results into a variety of reports tailored to the needs of those who used the information. She kept glue and a large pair of scissors to cut and paste drafts she thought too long. Researchers at the Centre say they produced reports to deadlines they never thought possible, but that Ruth never allowed second-rate work despite the urgency.

This kind of research is only possible because a socialist transition is under way, and involves questions that a committed social science can confront. In this, the Centre's work has not been easy. From the start, it had to fight the fascist Portuguese tradition of social science as rote and dogma, not analysis. Moreover socialist transition implies class struggle, which is reflected in choices of development strategy and tactics. Ms First became part of that struggle, and often voiced strong criticisms. Her comments, for example, on agricultural mechanisation were not always well received. But they were always listened to. As she had been for so long in the ANC and South African Communist Party,

she was a militant insider, speaking a language people understood.

Because the Centre puts its research into the broader context of a move toward socialism, its reports are never consultants' cookbooks intended to solve problems simply. But Frelimo has set especially hard challenges. For example, the tea industry is known for its exploitation of workers. Frelimo believes it can produce tea and earn foreign exchange but end the exploitation. The Centre's researchers spent a month living in villages on tea plantations, carefully studying the relationship of the peasants to the tea estates and to their own farms. The colonial estates depended on a huge pool of seasonal pickers, who could be paid starvation wages because their families produced food. The first step in changing this must be a move toward a permanent workforce. Instead of being isolated from each other through the constant turnover, the permanent workers could gain skills and lay the foundation for worker control. And any move to a permanent workforce, the Centre found, must be linked to the formation of agricultural co-operatives.

The tea study, and all others, are not done just by a few researchers. They involve all the students in a year-long development course, which is the other focus of the Centre's work. Although they are doing a post-graduate level course, the students usually have no more than secondary schooling. They are nominated by Frelimo, ministries, and the army, and include high officials and even Central Committee members. They continue half time in their normal jobs and half time in the Centre.

The course is not to train researchers, but to train to think concretely the people actually creating the transition to socialism. The annual research project comes at the middle of the course, and the whole second half of the year is spent building on that to understand more deeply the problems facing Mozambique.

Frelimo has always seen Mozambique's development as being inextricably linked to the liberation of the entire region. It has supported the ANC and the Zimbabwe liberation movements at considerable immediate cost to itself. The Centre has been part of that regional perspective. Its first study was of migrant miners returned from South Africa. This led to a conference in Lusaka of labour exporting countries, which tried to draw up a migrant workers' charter. Ruth First was a key figure at that conference, which drew to her the renewed calumny of the South African press. The Centre also applied its Marxist analysis to South Africa and the region as a whole, and its studies helped to inform Frelimo policy.

Ruth First came to Mozambique by choice, and made it the focus of her work. She saw that it is still an open question whether Mozambique can make the transition to socialism. She worked for that transformation, because she saw the victory of socialism in Mozambique as crucial for the development of socialism in South Africa. Clearly the apartheid regime agrees, which is why it has stepped up attacks on Mozambique, and why it killed Ruth First. □