

RUTH FIRST

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Ruth First was killed on August 17 last by a letter-bomb sent to her at the Centre of African Studies at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. She was then the director of research at the Centre and had been in Mozambique for three years. No one seriously doubts that she was murdered by agents of the South African security police. They chose their victim well: for she was one of the most gifted and dedicated South African revolutionaries of our time, and she was, by virtue of her work and her writings, a source of growing influence and inspiration.

Ruth First was born in Johannesburg in 1925 and was the daughter of Jewish left-wing parents who had emigrated to South Africa from Lithuania. She joined the South African Communist Party while a student at Witwatersrand University and became the editor of a series of left-wing newspapers and magazines successively banned by the government. In 1956, she and her husband Joe Slovo were among the defendants in the mass treason trial which ended in the acquittal of all the accused. In the early sixties, she was banned from journalism and was arrested in 1963: the time spent in solitary confinement was the subject of her book *117 Days*. She left South Africa on her release and settled in London with her husband and three daughters.

It was soon after that I came to know her, and the following brief remarks are about her as the person I knew: others who are better qualified will in due course write about her work.

One of the most remarkable things about Ruth First was her ability to combine two very different attitudes. On the one hand, she was totally and irrevocably committed to the cause she had adopted as a student. Her whole personality conveyed an impression of quiet resolve; and it was clear that, whoever else came to be daunted by the hardness and steepness of the road, she would not: for her, the struggle against oppression in South Africa would in one way or another remain her paramount concern in exile as it had been when she was there. On the other hand, her commitment was allied to a sharply critical view of the shortcomings of the left. She was deeply marked by the reflux from Stalinism; and she would get very angry at much that was said and done in the name of socialism and Marxism in many parts of the world. Nor was she sparing in her criticism of the new regimes in Africa, as witness for instance her analysis of many such regimes in *The Barrel of A Gun*. But this made no difference to her

commitment. She was the least 'utopian' of revolutionaries: but she was not in the least 'disillusioned'; and she never gave the slightest hint of a doubt about the justice of her cause or about the urgent need to strive for its advancement. She deplored the shortcomings, stupidities and crimes of her own side. But this never dimmed her sense that there was a struggle to be fought against the monstrous tyranny that is South Africa. From her earliest days in political struggle, she had had an exceptionally sharp sense of the concrete meaning of exploitation of black labour, and this remained a special interest of hers. She had in her early days in journalism helped to expose farm labour conditions in South Africa; and her last work in Mozambique was concerned with migrant miners from there into South Africa. Beyond all disappointments and setbacks, it was this sense of the reality of oppression which moved her.

Ruth First was above all a political activist, who became a writer and scholar by force of circumstances and because she had a remarkable talent for social and political analysis. She prized intellectual work but found academic life in Britain lacking in engagement and seriousness; and she looked at her own involvement in academic life with wry amusement, and with a sense that she did not really belong. She was intellectually very tough, direct, precise, unsentimental, impatient with rhetoric and pretentiousness. She had strong opinions, definite perspectives. This might have made her rigid and narrow; but it did not. She remained an intensely questioning person, with a great appetite for learning, with a free mind, an open ear, and a great sense of the ridiculous. When she first came to London, she was very shy about presenting her work to university seminars, and had to be persuaded, rather absurdly, that she was more than competent to do so. She became more confident as time went on, but she remained self-critical, and dismissive about her own achievements and successes. She was very self-demanding, and unassuming. The idea that she could ever become a symbol and an inspiration would have sent her into fits of embarrassed laughter. But her life and her death have made her so. When South Africa has had its revolution, hers will be one of the names in the roll of martyrs which new generations will honour; and she will remain a strong presence in the minds of those who knew her.