

# OBITUARY

## COMRADE RUTH FIRST



*Comrade Ruth First*

*The assassination of Comrade Ruth First has been greeted with outrage and sorrow by our people and the world democratic community at large. In Mozambique more than 2,000 people attended her funeral which was addressed by President Samora*

*Machel of Mozambique. In London a packed meeting of more than 600 heard tributes to Ruth First's life. Below SECHABA publishes an obituary for our Comrade Ruth First whose life's work was an outstanding contribution to our struggle.*



*Protest meeting against the threatened ban of the liberation paper 'The Guardian'*

Our Comrade Ruth First was killed by a letter bomb on Tuesday, August 17th, in the office of Mozambique's Centre for African Studies. With her were the Centre's director, Aquino de Braganca, a lecturer at the Centre Bridget O'Laughlin, and a visiting ANC activist Pallo Jordan. All were injured. All were victims of the spawning South African state terrorism, which is spreading like a blood-poison throughout Southern Africa.

Ruth's murder is the latest — but surely not the last — in that long trail of murder and assassination which South Africa has made into its first line of defence of apartheid. It is a trail which stretches from murders carried out in Security Police establishments like those of Babla Saloojee and Steve Biko, to those done in prison cells, like Neil Aggett's and Tshifwiwa Muofhe's; to assassinations in South Africa's streets, as with lawyer Griffiths Mxenge, and assassinations abroad, as with Joe Gqabi in Zimbabwe and Petrus Nzima and his

wife in Swaziland; and to the slaughter by South African military 'kill and destroy' missions abroad, at Matola, Mozambique, in Namibia, in southern Angola, and in allegedly "unauthorised" ventures into Zimbabwe and the Seychelles.

It is sometimes claimed by armchair philosophers that, inevitably, terrorism begets counter-terror. Perhaps so. To date, South African experience is different; the acts of individual terror and assassination have all been by one side, all by the state against its opponents; their opponents, though their fighting wing Umkhonto we Sizwe have replied without assassinations, car bombs, letter bombs or murder, but with open para-military assaults on the centres of state power — police stations, army establishments, defence industries — from which the assassinations and assaults on neighbouring territories spring.

There may yet well come a time when the murders and assassinations of the 25

opponents of apartheid will provoke similar assassinations of establishment politicians, police and military chiefs. But that time has not yet come. This is not yet a time for blind revenge; it is still a time of sorrow and of anger for those who have been killed, of learning from their lives and from their deaths the way to a better South African tomorrow.

The first lesson that must be learnt is underlined bold and clear by the killing of Ruth First. It is that, for South African fighters against apartheid, eternal vigilance is the price of life as well as of liberty! The disease of apartheid terrorism is spreading like a mortal infection everywhere; and everywhere vigilance is the first essential for defence.

There is too the lesson that the apartheid state's appetite for terrorism and brutality does not diminish, but grows stronger with every setback it suffers. There was a time, not far back in recent history, when white supremacy was maintained by a low-keyed combination of white political power, operating a code of repressive laws and a regime of petty police brutality. Through successive regimes of Botha, Hertzog, Smuts and even Malan, the white state thus maintained a semblance of peace and order without recourse to assassination or institutionalised torture. No longer. White supremacy is under challenge from the South African people and their liberation movement headed by the African National Congress. In a single generation, the defence of the white state has passed from the low-keyed oppression through a spate of ever more draconian laws, to the present abrogation of law and the enthronement of torture and murder.

And still the old equation of white supremacy and black oppression can not be kept in equilibrium. There will be more resort to violence, and worse brutality to come. The reign of terror spreads beyond South Africa's frontiers to the places where liberation fighters have moved abroad; now to those who harbour them; and

finally -- if the incursions into Zimbabwe and the Seychelles are to be understood -- to the supporters of those who support them.

It is not necessary to ask whose was the hand that placed the bomb? Who made and posted the letter that killed Ruth First? Who kidnapped the Bulgarian engineers working to develop Mozambique's economy? Or who placed the dynamite that destroyed a bridge in Angola? Terrorism in Southern Africa is South African terrorism; it is prepared, planned, organised and paid for from Pretoria, wherever it occurs and whoever sets the final fuse. This too is a lesson learnt again from Ruth's death, as it has been from many that have gone before.

But there are lessons also from her life and her life's work. Ruth was a Communist, born of communist parents who were amongst the earliest members of the Party in South Africa. The main thread of her adult life -- which drew to her the fierce enmity of the South African state and finally their decision to eliminate her -- came from that communist matrix. Ruth's work for which she will be long remembered and whose legacy will remain -- united two sides of South African communism; the one, total dedication to the cause of black liberation as an essential preparation for South African socialism; the other, a belief in the abilities of the ordinary people to liberate themselves when roused to collective decision taking and collective action. If the Communist Party was a small, specially dedicated, specially active detachment of the people, its function was never to go-it-alone, but to serve as the kernel, the raising agent of collective mass action. The important passages of Ruth's life illustrate the point completely...

Consider her years as the Johannesburg reporter for the weekly 'Guardian'. The Guardian voice for the radical left -- for the Communist Party, for the trade unions, and for radical black nationalists. The left founded, financed, wrote and finally sold



*Comrade Ruth First at a protest meeting in London*

the journal on the city streets, making of it an organiser of the masses, a raising agent. Between the journalists and the whole liberation movement there was a two-way exchange: the journal built the movement, and the movement built the journal.

So too Ruth's most important and memorable journalistic exercise -- the expose of the farm labour scandal, in which black pass-law offenders in the

cities were being literally sold off. (see following article - ed) The Bethal farm labour scandal was more than a news scoop. It was in fact part of the whole two-way exchange between the Guardian and the liberation movement, begun long before, continued in the research of the story, and carried on into the potatoe boycott campaign which was its aftermath.

Ruth's greatest journalistic expose triggered the boycott campaign; but the 27

boycott campaign magnified the expose beyond a journalist's wildest dreams. It was perhaps the most powerful illustration of the symbiosis between her own work and the mass people's movement which characterised all Ruth's best and most memorable activities.

It was to be seen also in her editorship of the radical literary-political review 'Fighting Talk', in the 1950s. Again a journal directed, financed and circulated by the movement; informed by the critiques and opinions of the movement's spokesmen and thinkers, and in turn informing and educating a new generation of movement activists; sponsoring the new generation of young black writers who could find no other outlets in white South Africa for their talents - Alfred Hutchinson, Richard Rive and others; who in turn helped the remarkable move of the black intelligentsia towards the ANC in that period.

The symbiosis between Ruth and the mass movement in the mutual exchange in collective work led also to the success of her pioneering study of South West Africa - now Namibia - published by Penguin in 1963. Here she brought an acute analytical mind to bear on a systematic examination of that troubled territory not from the standpoint of the colonists and imperial administrators, but from the standpoint of the subject people. It was a book derived more from close fraternal contact with SWAPO activists than from the archives. Ruth's links with SWAPO were built on her credentials as an activist of the South African liberation movement; then provided the unique understanding and insights into Namibia's people's struggle which gave the book its significance and strength. And, in continuing the pattern of all Ruth's work, the book in turn reinforced that struggle, providing a comprehensive overview and analysis of Namibia.

For the period of her life in exile in Britain - 1964 -80, that close intimate link between her own work and the mass

movement and mass struggles of the South African people became stretched, the symbiotic links of her political life attenuated. Remote from the main centres of the South African struggle, cut off by vast distance from the daily process of mass development and growth, she devoted her formidable intellect and considerable energies to the British anti-apartheid movement and to the ANC mission in Britain.

But the powerful impulse was to be rediscovered, and to assert itself anew in Mozambique, in Maputo on what was intended to be a "temporary" assignment to the Centre for African Studies. Here she found again that great capacity for two-way interchange and mutual strengthening between her own special qualities and those of the masses. In this case, it was no longer in South Africa but in Mozambique - not with the ANC but with FRELIMO.

The motive springs were the same - to provide a people with information and strengths to enable it to carry through its own liberation, and pass from the colonial heritage to the socialist future. In her work in the Centre of African studies, guiding the research and investigation vital to Frelimo's decision-making on the tasks of the new state, all Ruth's experiences and skills combined; - her academic skills as sociologist and teacher, her journalistic skills as investigator and researcher, her political skills as organiser and raising agent for the masses. Again it was a two-way exchange, so characteristic of her life - Ruth and the Centre feeding Frelimo with the material for growth; Frelimo, and its activists and its mass contacts amongst the people feeding the Centre with the personnel, the inspiration and incentive for its growth.

It is in this profound inter-change between her own political work and the mass movement of the peoples towards socialism that Ruth made so deep and important an impress, and left so crucial an example for other activists in the movement to emulate. It is through this inter-

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change that a part of her life has been left behind, living and growing in the people's movement, even after the assassins have done their work. And it is through this legacy she has left behind her for the whole of our movement that the final lesson may be drawn even in the time for mourning and of sorrow, even in the time of anger

and of loss. Ruth's life has helped to build and thus to leave behind her a movement strong in the certainty that, in the end of ends, it is not the assassins who will destroy our movement, but our movement for people's freedom which will destroy the assassins and their bombs.