

The Ruth First Scholarship

Ruth First was an outstanding intellectual, scholar and investigative journalist and a revolutionary committed to social justice and human emancipation. As an institution whose slogan is 'Where Leaders Learn', we believe that Ruth First personifies the qualities that we seek to cultivate in our graduates and that she serves as an inspirational role-model to young South Africans.

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Dr Saleem Badat, Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University

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The Ruth First Trust (UK) and Rhodes University have therefore established in her memory the Ruth First Scholarship. This scholarship will support students studying full-time at Rhodes University towards Masters or Doctoral degrees in the fields of politics, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, economics, social policy, democracy studies, development studies, media studies, or studies in cognate disciplines with a strong social and human rights orientation.

The scholarship is specifically intended to support candidates whose work is in the spirit of Ruth First's life and work, poses difficult social questions, and who are interested in linking knowledge and politics and scholarship and action.

Black and women South African and Mozambican candidates will be given preference in the award of the scholarship, as will candidates who are able to demonstrate financial need and disadvantaged social origins. Candidates will be assessed on their academic record, their previous scholarly outputs, their track record of leadership and involvement in projects and organisations related to social and human rights issues, and on their ability to clearly articulate their intended area of study.



Rhodes continues to
thrive in the Arts,
Humanities and Social
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of our students in
these fields.

RHODES UNIVERSITY

Situated in the Eastern Cape, Rhodes University is one of South Africa's outstanding universities in teaching, research and community engagement. The smallest university in South Africa, some 7 000 students are currently enrolled. Almost 25% are postgraduates, 21% international students from 50 countries, and 59% are women. Over 3 200 students live in Rhodes' 48 residences and are associated with its 10 halls.

Rhodes has a favourable academic staff to student ratio, which means that students are guaranteed easy access to academics and close supervision. We have the best undergraduate pass rates and graduation rates in South Africa, and outstanding postgraduate success rates. Rhodes has also for many years consistently been amongst the top three universities in terms of research publications per academic staff member.

The Social Sciences and Humanities, once crucial in questioning, challenging and resisting apartheid have in recent years received less attention as science and technology and business fields have been prioritised. This has led to a reduction in the funding available to students in Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines. Nationally, fewer young people are registering for the social sciences and humanities subjects, with potentially negative implications for the intellectual and cultural life of South Africa.

Rhodes, however, continues to thrive in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and over 50% of our students are in these fields. The University has established or is establishing a range of new postgraduate and research programmes to foster critical research and debate on issues of South African political economy, democracy, social policy and development. This commitment is exemplified by the creation of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, a new pro-poor Social Policy and Transformative Social Policy programme, and a programme in Integrated Development.

We can think of no better way to keep the spirit of Ruth alive than to encourage a combination of intellectual excellence and political commitment, these being the principles by which Ruth lived and for which she died.



A message from Gillian Slovo

As one of Ruth's daughters and now Chair of the Ruth First Trust, it has given me, my fellow Trustees and the family, the greatest satisfaction to know that the Trust has over the years been able to support a new generation of scholars, journalists, thinkers and campaigners.

After Ruth's murder, the Ruth First Trust was set-up in London by Ronald Segal with money raised mainly from contributions from Ruth's many international friends and colleagues. It was administered by a group of trustees drawn from Ruth's family, friends and comrades, and its funds were spent, mostly in South Africa, to support initiatives carried out in the spirit of Ruth's life and work. As an example of this, for the last few years we have helped fund a journalism prize at Wits University. This has provided us with an important opportunity to not only celebrate Ruth's life but also to celebrate the achievements of some outstanding young South Africans. It has been heart warming to discover the admiration that this new generation have for Ruth's courage, independence of thought, and for her contribution to the struggle for freedom in South Africa.

The Board of Trustees would like to ensure that her legacy continues and so, in partnership with Rhodes University, have identified a project that we feel will achieve this aim. The remaining funds held in the Trust are to be transferred to Rhodes and will be matched by the University's UK based Trust. The combined contribution will be the foundation for the establishment of an endowed scholarship which will be named after Ruth. The scholarship will fund students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are prepared to ask difficult questions, and who are interested in the cross-over between knowledge and politics, academia and action. We can think of no better way to keep the spirit of Ruth alive than to encourage a combination of intellectual excellence and political commitment, these being the principles by which Ruth lived and for which she died.

Together with Rhodes we want to ensure that this gift to the people of South Africa will provide scholarships of real value to those who come from such challenging backgrounds – the very people, to whom Ruth dedicated her life.

These are also principles which are important to Rhodes which is one of the reasons why we have chosen this university as our partner. Together with Rhodes we want to ensure that this gift to the people of South Africa will provide scholarships of real value to those who come from such challenging backgrounds – the very people, to whom Ruth dedicated her life.

In order to reach our objective we need your support and I am writing to you now to ask for your help in considering giving your own donation to this cause. Your contribution will be a gift to the future generations of South Africans, who will ask the difficult questions, and develop the rigor and brilliance that Ruth so eloquently expressed in everything she did. You will be helping to develop disadvantaged students into the future leaders of South Africa and also honouring Ruth's life and achievements.

I look forward to your support and I am happy to answer any questions which you may have.

Yours,

Gillian Slovo.

The encounter with her voice or with her written word releases in us, sentimentalists and nonsentimentalists alike, not only intense poignancy and anger, but also a sense of great pride and satisfaction of the kind she never permitted herself to feel in her manifold and lasting accomplishments.

RUTH FIRST

The Honourable Mr Justice Albie Sachs

Written for the 1989 reprint of "117 Days," by Ruth First, published by Monthly Review Press, New York

Perhaps it is a characteristic of our generation that we want to be the most ordinary and normal of people and the most extraordinary at the same time. Ruth was more extraordinary than ordinary, not in her style and personal behaviour, but in her life. In her daily routine she was neat, well-organized; she dressed carefully and paid considerable attention to interpersonal relations, even if her directness made her appear undiplomatic, which she was, and insensitive, which she was not. She would certainly have rejected the idea that her death by assassination made her life interesting, that she should be mythologized and turned into a hero because she was a victim of racist terrorism.

In fact, Ruth was something of a hero to us in her lifetime; she made us feel proud to belong to a movement that had personalities like her in its ranks. We always wondered what she would think of this or that, whether a major new political initiative or a new film or novel or painting or even a dress or jacket. She lived vividly, in the front line of ideas and action, aware of and accepting the risks that went with such a life. She once described what a pleasure it was talking to ANC leader Oliver Tambo, you could see his mind expanding in front of you, she said, he was interested in and open to new ideas. Ruth could have been describing herself, with the difference that whereas OR, as we called him, could have heard you out with infinite patience and courtesy, Ruth would have interrupted before you were a quarter of the way through, having impatiently grasped the theme and already begun to debate it.

Her quickness was often startling, even disconcerting, to others; she would be racing ahead, unaware that she had left you behind and then, discovering the gap, irritated by your slowness. Soberly insightful into the personalities of others, often severely objective and correct because she looked at people directly, launching her analytical harpoons without concern for status and without making the million allowances we always made for some because he or she was an old comrade or had been to jail or was married to someone we liked, she appeared to have virtually no insight into herself, in particular into her brilliance.

Like that of all major personalities, or even of minor ones, Ruth's life cannot be reduced to a set of simple biographical formulae. Yet there are certain themes that appear to be predominant, certain fundamental contradictions which underlay the itinerary she followed and explained at least in part the impact she invariably made while following her path. Ruth was white in an overwhelmingly black movement. Even in a movement as mature as the ANC this is not entirely unproblematic. Racism might be false consciousness, but it has a real existence. We pride ourselves on belonging to a non-racial organisation dedicated to building a non-racial society, but we carry with us a multitude of complexes, whether of inferiority or superiority, often the more pernicious for being unconscious. There are also very real cultural differences, related principally to language but also to customs, ways of doing things, cuisine, even modes of address and styles of speaking. Growing up as a critic of apartheid in the rich but sterile world of the oppressors in the lush northern suburbs of Johannesburg is not the same thing as growing up in the spartan but vivacious universe of the oppressed in Soweto.

How did Ruth respond to this contradiction? For her there was nothing problematic about being in the struggle against national and class domination. South African society was manifestly, even grotesquely, oppressive and everyone had to do everything possible to replace it with something better. There was never any onus on her to justify being in the struggle; on the contrary, the onus was on those outside to justify their non-participation. What was

important was that she was not a white fighting for the blacks, but a person fighting for her own right to live in a just society, which in the South African context meant destroying the whole system of white domination.

One never sensed that Ruth felt any discomfort or tension at being white in a largely black movement. On the surface, she might have appeared to be almost a caricature of 'whiteness': articulate, impatient, always pushing the argument to its logical conclusion, unhappy with compromise or attempts to reach compromise or concessions to culturally based reactionary positions. She was physically uneasy about her own participation in the singing and dancing at meetings and unable to take part in the banter in African languages. Yet, this in no way inhibited her activity as a thinker, organizer, educator and writer in the movement. She was in constant demand from all sections of the organization, nominated for all sorts of committees and especially loved for her study classes, where a kindly and supportive side of her emerged and no one would have regarded her as impatient. The fact is that she resolved the contradiction of race not by assuming contorted roles, but by placing at the disposal of the movement all the accomplishments that her privileged upbringing had given her. Comrade Ruth, or Mama Ruth as she was known, was a greatly loved personality because she was fearless and honest and incisive and because she never sought popularity or patronized anybody. Real tears were shed at her funeral, and no one bothered to check whether they were rolling down white faces or black.

Ruth was an intellectual of middle-class background in a struggle dedicated to the emancipation of the workers. Here too she resolved this contradiction, not by trying to wipe out her middle-class upbringing or deny her immense intellectual gifts, but by feeding into and enriching the struggle with all she had to offer. Ruth did not just read books; she tore them apart (the phrase was hers). While living in Europe she immersed herself in the political, literary, and film culture of the time. She was absorbed by Ralph Miliband's absorption about the state, fascinated by Pier Paolo Pasolini's fascination with the law-defying bravura of the lumpen. Whatever her milieu, she plunged

into the reality around her and attacked it with her wit and radical vision. In that sense she was a great internationalist, bringing into our movement the big and little themes of other movements and cultures and transmitting to other movements the essence and personality of our struggle. Again, it was never a question of sacrifice. The constant movement and travel, the risk of imprisonment and assassination, were part and parcel of the life she had chosen for herself at an early age. Whether growing up in such an atmosphere represented a sacrifice of the rights of her children is the theme of the beautifully scripted and powerfully made film, *A World Apart*. That Shawn, her daughter, grew up with the courage and intelligence to ask the question and write the story is part of the answer. When our parents' generation went off to fight in World War Two no one accused them of sacrificing the rights of their children.

Ruth's achievements were notable by any standards. She wrote many books on a large number of topics – on Namibia, on the rise of the military in Africa, on Colonel Gaddafi and the politics of oil and a biography of the South African writer, feminist and socialist, Olive Schreiner. Socially she was much sought after; universities clamoured for her appearance. Perhaps most important of all, she was loved and admired in her movement and respected in progressive circles the world over. Even her captors acknowledged her very special qualities. Yet the one person perpetually dissatisfied with Ruth was Ruth herself.

In a spirited and noble tribute written in 1988 for the English re-edition of *117 Days*, her husband Joe Slovo quotes from one of her letters to him: 'My introspection gets more and more involved as I go in for my favourite pastime of undermining me and my character and seeing my faults... Trouble is I would like to prove myself I can produce something worthwhile.' For those of us who knew Ruth's great creative and productive capacity – she tackled many projects and left few of them unfinished – for those of us familiar with the wide number of activities she had

undertaken and fulfilled with aplomb in many countries over the years, such self-critical words seem astonishing. Yet, they accord with her great vulnerability and manifest sense of dissatisfaction.

A part of the explanation, perhaps the major part, must lie in the fact that the one contradiction she never succeeded in resolving was that of being a woman in a male-dominated world. The South African struggle has for decades had many outstanding women figures. For the most part they have been orators and organizers of note, often brilliant; sometimes they have been writers. Ruth was unusual in that she took men on at the level of ideas, as she proved in her years as director of research at the Centre for African Studies in Mozambique. In this capacity she was able to carry her role of scientist-critic-militant to new levels. Under the leadership of the centre's director, Aquino Braganza, and of herself, the centre was for some years perhaps unique in the world in that, in a revolutionary context, it managed both to support and to criticize the government. The support took the form of training government cadres in political science and research methodology, as well as doing research in areas of fundamental concern to the government. The criticism took the form of passing on to the government information and ideas relevant to the formulation and execution of policy, however inconvenient and in conflict with the general line such might have been. Ruth was highly regarded in government circles and whenever the opportunity arose for her to communicate her views informally she took advantage of it. The centre itself became a zone of intense intellectual activity, of debate regarded by some as scandalous, and a base of extensive laborious and highly fruitful field research. Its productivity in a few short years was enormous.

Ruth was a critic in a movement that required a high degree of discipline. Whether working in South Africa in what we call the 'legal days', or in the underground, or in exile, Ruth was always a critical and creative thinker, ready to challenge any orthodoxy or established views. Of all the contradiction that drove her on, this was the most important, resulting in what might be her most notable, and least known, achievement. Without being privy to

happenings in the innermost depths of the movement, but knowing her relationship with the underground in the period just before and after the capture of Nelson Mandela, and knowing the respect in which she was held by the leadership, one can say that there is not an important political document of the resistance in South Africa in the three decades leading up to her death that did not benefit from her rigorous scrutiny. Ruth was not always right, but she invariably helped others to be right by forcing them to argue and defend their views. In the people's struggle for justice, nothing was hallowed except the struggle itself. She hated shoddy and cowardly thinking, the repetition of slogans and formula-type analysis. She could be demanding, harsh, even unfair, but she was always honest and unscheming and open to new approaches.

The letter bomb that took Ruth's life destroyed the dynamism of the centre for many years. It also deprived us of one of our great militants and the world of a major intellectual figure. There is no point in imagining how a fallen comrade would have reacted to the stirring upsurge of popular revolt in South Africa in the years after her death, or to the enormous expansion of the movement to isolate apartheid, including the application of sanctions by the United States, something we all wanted but never expected. Yet hearing Ruth's voice on tape or watching her play herself in the poetic and lovely film the BBC made of her *117 Days*, or even seeing her represented by Barbara Hershey in *A World Apart*, evokes a sense of her presence that is immediate and powerful.

The encounter with her voice or with her written word releases in us, sentimentalists and nonsentimentalists alike, not only intense poignancy and anger, but also a sense of great pride and satisfaction of the kind she never permitted herself to feel in her manifold and lasting accomplishments. In the end, it is not the security police or military, it is Ruth that comes again.

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RUTH FIRST: A MEMORIAL ADDRESS

Ronald Segal

Text of an address given at a memorial meeting in London on 8 September 1982. Published in "Review of African Political Economy," No. 25 (1982)

Ruth First's life was essentially a political act. And her death was, of course, a political act as well, of a hideously different kind. She would have wanted our celebration of her life, and our grief and our rage at her murder, to be, above all, a political act. We will not disappoint her. Let those who killed her know that if their motive was to intimidate or dismay us, we are not to be intimidated or dismayed. Indeed: those of us who were falling asleep have been aroused, those of us who were growing tired have been reinvigorated; those of us who have been separately leading our own lives have been made aware again of where together our lives should lead. The revolutionary movement, to which she gave so much of herself, will find in us only a reinforcement of purpose, of resources and of effort.

It is right that in remembering Ruth here, we should remember all the other victims, known and unknown to us, of South Africa's institutionalised terrorism. Ruth would have been the last person to expect her own sacrifice to be regarded as unique. But especially those who knew and who loved her must hope that she will be remembered also for herself, as a person of exceptional qualities.

She was a remarkable journalist: wholly concerned with identifying and exposing the various horrors of racial rule; with reporting and encouraging the course of struggle against it. She was not indifferent to the risks, the costs that were involved. She simply recognised them as the necessary consequences of her choice. Those investigations and

reports of her – into forced labour on the farms, the workings of the pass laws, conditions in the gold mines; on demonstrations, boycotts, campaigns – are classic examples of committed journalism. They do not peddle abstract phrases. They depict the real suffering of the individual victim; the real complex mood of collective defiance. They must not be left for occasional researchers to note in the archives. I hope – no, I'm sure – that some of her characteristic articles will be republished in a special collection.

Many remarkable journalists cannot make the leap from the article to the book. They know where they are in the sentence and the paragraph, but they lose their way in the larger landscape. Ruth was all too aware of this. Those, and there are some, who saw so mistakenly in her a self-assurance amounting to arrogance, never knew the turmoil of uncertainty, of supposed inadequacies, that she brought to the writing of her books. It was a turmoil objectively without reason. For she had the crucial qualities of an author. She had both the sweep and the closeness of vision to see only the necessary pieces that make up the whole. She never succumbed to the temptation, so strong when there is so much space to fill, of using words for how they sound rather than for what they mean. She had a proper respect for language, and that is why she used it so well. She had that rare capacity to recreate a face, a gesture, a smell, a mood, in a phrase or two. She might write, though not often, an untidy sentence. She never wrote a lazy or a meretricious one.

It is no belittlement of her other books to say that *117 Days* demands a special place. It is, I believe, one of the best prison books to have come, not only out of South Africa, but out of anywhere in the past few decades. It is totally free of that fault, so common to its kind, of self-indulgence. But then, in its courage, its humour, its vitality, its compassion, and its commitment to the truth, however painful, it is the closest that Ruth ever let the reader come to herself. I am glad to say that Penguin have agreed urgently to republish *117 Days* as a tribute to Ruth. So much of Ruth is there, for others, who will never know her now, to know something of the person that she was.

I must mention two other books for particular reasons. *South West Africa*, her first, was a pioneering study of Namibia, with a recital of its then little known long anguished history and a detailed indictment of the greed and violence which informed South African rule. Few such books can have been researched and written in such difficult conditions. But there are no shortcomings to excuse. Knowledge of those difficulties only illuminates the book's achievement, as the persecution, in bannings and restrictions, that Ruth suffered as a result only illuminates the book's impact on value.

The Barrel of a Gun is a masterly analysis of the military regime in Africa, its genesis and nature. It was Ruth's first extensive consideration of society and political development in independent Africa; and the temptation must have been strong to excuse, extenuate, blame only the imperialist past. She was too honest, and she cared too much. The book will survive not only for its original research and analysis but for the passion of its concern with a popular, socialist alternative.

Ruth was an intellectual: though she would doubtless have agitatedly dismissed such a term, as an attempt to limit her with a label. She loved ideas and needed them – no one, more – but not for themselves. They were precious and necessary as instruments in the process of liberation. And it was essentially in terms of that process that she measured their truth.

Her ideas came from the great store of revolutionary socialist thought. But she continually re-examined, readjusted or reinforced them, by what she saw and learnt – and she was always learning – till there was something of herself in them, and they were enriched as a result. It was not, for instance, in her view, a departure from her revolutionary socialism but a vital extension of it that drew her to the cause of women's liberation; a commitment to which we owe the important biography of Olive Schreiner that she wrote together with Ann Scott.

She was, by all accounts, a superb teacher. For, characteristically, her teaching was directed not at getting her students to give her back what she thought were the right answers, but at getting them to ask the right questions and so set about finding the right answers for themselves. Certainly, as her work at the Centre for African Studies in Maputo so tellingly demonstrated, she saw academic study and research not as some sterile engagement to a safe and separate world, but as a straight road between intellect and action, between knowledge and change.

That is why as journalist, author, intellectual, teacher, she was, first and foremost, a South African revolutionary. And for me, it is not the least of the tributes to the meaning of the African National Congress that Ruth First never wavered in her allegiance to the African National Congress, as the paramount vehicle of the South African revolution.

I cannot conclude without a few words of a more personal kind about someone who was, for so many years, my dearest friend. She was fascinatingly full of paradoxes: seemingly less concerned with the risks to her life than with having her hair done; plainly disapproving whenever Joe and I played cards for money but unable to resist spending much of the little that she had on a pair of Italian shoes; commanding on the platform and in debate, but shy and uncertain in private encounters with those she did not know; profoundly cultured and conscious of all the books she had not read, the pictures she had not seen. She had a striking elegance of body and of mind. And without ever making a single concession to them, from her own high standards, she worried about what others might think of her. She had an enormous capacity for friendship. She was warm and sensitive and generous and always unswervingly loyal. She was such fun. I admired her for what she did. And I love her for what she was. I will feel the loss of her to the last moment of my life.

WRITING LEFT

Don Pinnock

The radical press which battled through the 1980s to end apartheid in South Africa was not an immaculate conception. It was born of traditions developed by a group of small newspapers that emerged in the 1940s and were battered into silence by the early 1960s. Many of the journalists and editors from these earlier publications were imprisoned or driven into exile and emerged, in 1994, as the leaders of a new, democratic South Africa.

One of the most influential journalists of that press tradition did not return. In 1982 Ruth First was killed by a letter bomb sent to her Mozambique office by white police operatives. In a flash of powerful explosive South Africa lost one of its most intelligent, incisive and dedicated journalists.

Born in Johannesburg into a left-wing family that had fled the pogroms in Lithuania, Ruth was exposed to constant political meetings and debates from an early age. By the time she was in high school she was an accomplished public speaker and debater. She studied social science at the University of the Witwatersrand and in 1949 married Joe Slovo, a fellow student.

After graduating, Ruth worked for *The Guardian*, a socialist newspaper highly critical of racism. The paper was banned many times but always reappeared under a new name. She wrote a number of devastating exposés, beginning with a series on the farm labour system, in which men whose identity documents were not 'in order' were sent to potato farms as virtual slave labour. Her articles caused a political furor and the farm system was gradually abandoned after several spectacular court cases.

Ruth's detailed coverage of the government's attempt to extend pass laws to black women helped mobilise a historic march on the Union Buildings by thirty thousand women. Her reporting on a boycott of buses by black commuters after a price increase alerted her to the power of grassroots action. This had a considerable effect on her future political thinking.

She was a founder member of the underground South African Communist Party and the above-ground South African Congress of Democrats, a white organization that supported the African National Congress. When an 'alternative' parliament was mooted, oppressed people across the country were called on to submit clauses for a Bill of Rights. First was given the job of compiling these, thus producing the initial draft of the Freedom Charter, the foundation document for South Africa's present constitution. She was also editor of the radical journal *Fighting Talk*.

The government declared the Freedom Charter to be treasonable and arrested 156 activists, including Ruth and Joe Slovo. The subsequent Treason Trial lasted four years, and all the defendants were found not guilty. However, within days of the verdict Ruth and many others were served with banning orders. Ruth's order prevented her from associating with any other banned person and from practicing journalism. Her response was to research and write a book about South Africa's illegal mandate over South West Africa.

In the early 1960s the African National Congress formed Umkhonto we Sizwe whose members included Nelson Mandela, First and Slovo. In a raid on the group's headquarters in Rivonia, most of the leaders were arrested and later tried and given life sentences. By pure chance Ruth was not at Rivonia when the raid took place. She had been party to the decision to purchase the farm and other properties with funds from outside the country and was involved with the development of the underground movement which used the Rivonia house as its base. According to Joe she knew 'almost everything'.

Ruth, however, was followed and then arrested. 'The largest of my escorts,' she wrote, 'carried my suitcase into the Europeans Only entrance of the police station. As he reached the charge office doorway he looked upwards. "Bye-bye, blue sky," he said, and chuckled at his joke.'

She was imprisoned without trial for 117 days, during which time she was constantly interrogated. Believing she knew too much and might implicate her comrades, she attempted suicide using sleeping pills, but survived. After being released, she and her three young daughters moved to England to join Joe, who was out of the country when the arrests took place.

In London Ruth became a public campaigner against apartheid. She acted in a film about her detention and wrote and co-wrote a number of finely researched books about Africa: *South West Africa* (1963); *117 Days* (1965, on her detention); *The Barrel of a Gun* (1970, dealing with African coups); *Olive Schreiner* (1980, a biography of the South African novelist); and *Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant* (1977). She also edited books by Mandela, Govan Mbeki, the Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi and former Kenyan Vice-President Oginga Odinga.

Ruth worked as a researcher at the University of Manchester and as a lecturer at Durham University. In 1977 she became the director of research at the Centre for African Studies at Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique. There, in 1982, she was killed by a letter bomb sent by a South African police death squad.

The bomb, as Ronald Segal said, was the apartheid government's final act of censorship.

For an extensive bibliography of Ruth First's work see:

Williams, Gavin (1982) "Ruth First: a Preliminary Bibliography" in *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 25, pp 54–64.

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