

**RUTH
FIRST**



1925-1995



Ruth First was a South African anti-apartheid activist, journalist, and academic who played a key role in the struggle for human rights and social justice in her country. Born in Johannesburg in 1925, First grew up in a politically engaged family that encouraged her to think critically and challenge the injustices of the apartheid regime. From an early age, she was acutely aware of the racial disparities and inequalities that marked South African society, and she was determined to use her talents and education to fight against these injustices.

In the 1950s and 1960s, First became an active member of various anti-apartheid organizations, including the African National Congress (ANC) and the Congress of Democrats (COD). She was a passionate advocate for social change and saw journalism as a powerful tool for exposing the injustices of the apartheid system. In 1956, she co-founded the radical newspaper, "The S.A. Communist." In 1963 she was arrested for her involvement in the underground ANC movement and was subsequently held in detention without trial for 117 days. She was eventually banished to Swaziland, where she continued to work as a journalist and political activist.



Throughout her career, First was a vocal critic of the apartheid regime and used her platform to raise awareness about the human rights abuses being committed against Black South Africans. She wrote extensively about the brutal conditions of life in the townships, as well as the ways in which the government sought to silence its critics and maintain its grip on power. She was an advocate for worker's rights, including pressuring the South African government to pay workers for serving their fourteen-day notice period when terminated. In addition, she was instrumental in bringing attention to the plight of women in the anti-apartheid movement, highlighting their central role in the struggle for freedom and equality.



First's contributions to the anti-apartheid movement were varied and far-reaching. She was a gifted journalist and writer, and her reporting on the struggles and triumphs of the anti-apartheid movement helped to galvanize support both within South Africa and internationally. She also played a critical role in training and developing young activists, many of whom went on to become leaders in the movement themselves.

Despite her unwavering commitment to the cause of freedom and equality, First was tragically taken from the world far too soon. In 1982, she was assassinated by a letter bomb sent by agents of the South African apartheid regime. Although her life was cut short, her legacy lives on as a symbol of courage, dedication, and resilience in the face of oppression. Ruth First will always be remembered as a hero of the anti-apartheid struggle, a visionary thinker, and a passionate advocate for social justice for all people.




Ten years ago South African exile Ruth First was assassinated in Mozambique. In Ann Collins' column about this remarkable woman.

RUTH FIRST

South African exile Ruth First was killed by a bullet from a Mozambique soldier in August 1982. Her husband, members of parliament and even presidents from 14 countries came to her funeral.

They came to mourn Ruth First not only because she was a stateswoman of exceptional ability, but also because she was a woman who had struggled to give voice to the poor and oppressed.

The University of the Western-Cape recently held a conference in honour of First on the 20th anniversary of her death. The event was a reminder that First stood for among South African exiles, as one who made a mark on other parts of Africa.

She was best known as a political activist in the Congress of Democrats. She was a gifted writer who helped to draft the Freedom Charter. She was also an underground member of the banned South African Communist Party.

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RUTH FIRST

HER TIMELINE

1925 - Ruth First is born on May 4th in Johannesburg, South Africa to Jewish immigrants from Latvia.

1942 - At the age of 17, Ruth begins attending the University of the Witwatersrand, studying law and social sciences. It is during this time that she becomes politically active and joins the Communist Party of South Africa.

1946 - Ruth marries South African anti-apartheid activist Joe Slovo.

1948 - The National Party wins the General Election and introduces the apartheid system, which brutally enforces segregation and discrimination against black South Africans.

1950 - Ruth becomes involved in the Defiance Campaign, a peaceful protest against apartheid laws. She is arrested and imprisoned for 117 days.





1953 - Ruth becomes co-editor of "The Guardian", a left-wing newspaper that opposes apartheid. She also becomes a target of government surveillance.

1960 - Ruth is banned by the government, prohibiting her from speaking or writing publicly, and is forced to go into hiding.

1963 - Ruth is arrested and detained without trial for 117 days, during which time she is tortured.

1964 - Ruth is banned again, and her passport is confiscated, preventing her from leaving the country.

1978 - Ruth is assassinated by a letter bomb sent to her office at the University of Maputo in Mozambique, where she had been living in exile with her family.

1995 - The Truth and Reconciliation Commission finds that Ruth First was assassinated by agents of the South African government in conjunction with the apartheid regime.

RESOURCES

- <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/ruth-first>
- <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/first-ruth>

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