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Fighting talk: Ruth First's early journalism 1947–1950

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While celebrated for her anti-apartheid activism, Ruth First's early journalism has received limited attention by scholars. The result has been an incomplete understanding of her political and intellectual development. Drawing from First's scrapbooks, this article examines some of the themes that preoccupied her from 1947–1950 while situating her work within the broader political context. Her journalism played a crucial role in chronicling resistance to segregationist policies in the pre-apartheid period and the role of cheap labour in capitalist development. Many of the themes that dominated her work on labour and development in Mozambique can be glimpsed in these scrapbooks.

Keywords: Ruth First; anti-apartheid; journalism; history; South Africa; cheap labour

[Paroles de défi : le début de carrière de journaliste de Ruth First de 1947 à 1950.] Alors que son activisme anti-apartheid est célébré, le début de la carrière en tant que journaliste de Ruth First a peu attiré l'attention des académiques. Le résultat de ce désintérêt fut une compréhension incomplète de son développement politique et intellectuel. Basé sur les notes de First, cet article examine quelques uns des thèmes qui l'ont préoccupée de 1947 à 1950, et replace son travail dans le contexte politique plus large. Son travail de journaliste a joué un rôle crucial dans les récits relatant la résistance aux politiques ségrégationnistes durant la période pré-apartheid et le rôle de la main d'œuvre bon marché dans le développement capitaliste. Plusieurs des thèmes qui ont dominé son travail sur la main d'œuvre et le développement au Mozambique peuvent être perçus dans ces notes.

Mots-clés : Ruth First ; anti-apartheid ; journalisme ; histoire ; Afrique du Sud ; main d'œuvre bon marché

Ruth Herloise First was killed by the apartheid government on 17 August 1982 while working in her office at Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique. She left behind her a rich intellectual, political and personal legacy that continues to inspire and educate. While she is often memorialised as an anti-apartheid heroine who played a crucial role in the drafting of the Freedom Charter, little attention has been paid to her early career as an investigative journalist. This lack of critical scholarship on First's journalism is unfortunate, as her early scrapbooks contain compelling accounts of resistance to segregationist policies in the pre-apartheid period and describe in detail the formation of a militant African working class in the townships and mining compounds of 1940s Johannesburg. It is in these

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early articles that we can observe her growing interest in the machinations of state and economic power and the impact on the lives of workers and the poor. It was through her journalism that she developed a trenchant, and largely unacknowledged, critique of South Africa's racial capitalism and the possibilities and potential for socialism.

This article draws extensively from her early scrapbooks (1947–1950), where she kept a record of her writing for a number of publications. Her scrapbooks have been made available online through the Ruth First Papers Project, supported by the *Review of African Political Economy*, and can be accessed by visiting ruthfirstpapers.org.uk.¹ It is difficult to know the exact purpose of these scrapbooks, but from existing accounts it is clear that she was assigned to a number of 'beats' in Johannesburg and around the Transvaal for *The Guardian* and other papers. Many stories, the Bethal farm labour scandal and the anti-pass campaigns in particular, were ones that she covered over a number of years. The scrapbooks seem to be a way for her to keep track of those stories she covered or was involved in politically. In some instances, the scrapbooks contain clippings from international publications that reprinted her work, most notably *The Daily Worker*, official organ of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

There is little secondary material to draw upon when writing about Ruth First. The only collection of her journalism, including a brief biography, can be found in Don Pinnock's (2012) *Ruth First: Voices of Liberation*. Resistance literature scholar Barbara Harlow (1996) has penned some insightful essays on First's prison writings, and many of her friends, family and comrades have offered their recollections on her life in a variety of publications (Williams 1996). A recent special issue of the *Review of African Political Economy* features valuable contributions on the materials contained in the Ruth First Archive (Rockel and Mahon 2014), reflections on her work with *ROAPE* and the Centre for African Studies in Mozambique (Williams et al. 2014), as well as vivid recollections on her life, writing and politics (Gentili 2014; Harlow 2014; O'Laughlin 2014; Pinnock 2014; Saul 2014; Zeilig 2014). A recently published book by Alan Wieder (2013) examines the life and times of First and her husband, Joe Slovo, in the struggle against apartheid. Drawing from interviews and archival material, Wieder's work provides valuable insights into the formative political experiences that would shape her later life. In a similar vein, this article seeks to deepen our understanding of her early work as a way of illuminating her later engagement with liberation struggles across Africa. In a sense, it is an attempt to do for Ruth First what she and Ann Scott did for Olive Schreiner: 'to relate her work to her politics, her politics to her personal life, and her personality to her career as a writer' (First and Scott 1980, 25).

This is the first academic evaluation of her scrapbooks, and the first to chart her politicisation through her journalistic writing. Given that the nature and scope of her work is so broad, I have restricted my study to her early days as a full-time correspondent for the Communist Party-aligned newspaper *The Guardian*, although some of the pieces she penned also appeared in *Fighting Talk*, *The Passive Resister* and *Inkululeko*. The sheer volume of writing she produced during these years is remarkable and deserving of further study. I endeavour to uncover some of the main issues and themes that preoccupied her during these years as a way of highlighting her broader political motivations and intellectual development. While her involvement in the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) played no small part in shaping her politics, I maintain that it was through her journalism that she came to understand the nature of racial capitalism in South Africa. Her journalism took her far from the comforts of white, middle-class Johannesburg and into the townships, compounds and prisons, where South Africa's experiments in segregation were at their most violent. It is through these encounters that she displayed, with masterful skill, the daily indignities experienced by the African population.

A life in writing and politics: Johannesburg in the 1940s

The daughter of Lithuanian immigrants, First was raised in a Johannesburg household steeped in leftist politics. Her father was elected to the committee of the CPSA in 1923 and her early years were spent listening to debates on the direction of the Bolshevik revolution on the steps of Johannesburg city hall. She began her studies at the University of the Witwatersrand at the height of the Second World War, where she became actively involved in leftist politics. She edited the Young Communist League's newspaper *Youth for a New South Africa*, and at 19 wrote a letter to the Institute of Race Relations concerning the government proposals on black farm labour. While she was actively involved in campus politics, her politics looked outward, to national and international struggles. 'On a South African university campus', she wrote, 'the student issues that matter are national issues' (First 1989, 116). She participated in one of the first joint African National Congress (ANC)–CPSA actions, the anti-pass campaign of 1944–1945, a movement that she would later document extensively in her work for *The Guardian*.

By the end of the war, she was working as a researcher for the city of Johannesburg, a job she described as 'sycophantic', which 'bored and disgusted' her (First 1989, 117). She quit at the outbreak of the 1946 miners' strike, which saw over 100,000 African miners launch a general strike for a minimum wage. The strike was a turning point for First and the worker's movement in South Africa:

A great squad of volunteers helped them set up strike headquarters in the most unlikely places, and from lodging rooms like the one I shared with a girlfriend, the handles of duplicating machines were turned through the night, while in the early hours before dawn white volunteers drove cars to the vicinity of the mine compounds and African organizers, hiding their city suits and their bundles of strike leaflets under colourful tribal blankets, wormed their way into the compounds . . . When the mine strike was over, I became a journalist. (First 1989, 117–118)

While the strike was ruthlessly crushed, O'Meara describes it as a watershed in South African politics: 'Most obviously it profoundly affected the direction and thrust of African opposition; patient constitutional protest by an elite rapidly gave way to mass political action and passive resistance' (O'Meara 1983 quoted in Wieder 2013, 55). For First, it 'was one of those great historic incidents that, in a flash of illumination, educates a nation, reveals what has been hidden, destroys lies and illusions' (quoted in *Ibid.*, 56).

Following the strike, Brian Bunting, a CPSA leader and left-wing journalist, recruited First to manage the Johannesburg offices of *The Guardian*. While the newspaper was never the formal mouthpiece of the CPSA, its journalism reflected the viewpoint of the party and it was widely seen as the party's unofficial mouthpiece. Under Bunting's editorship, the paper turned its focus to issues affecting the black community and First was charged with writing pieces on the social and economic impacts of segregationist policy. In his history of the paper, James Zug (2007) describes her work with the paper:

In her first four weeks at the *Guardian*, the twenty-two-year-old reported on a tin workers strike, opined on the royal visit, visited a Sophiatown squatter camp, and interviewed Yusuf Dadoo, Michael Scott, H.M. Basner and Anton Lembede. Two months later she crept into municipal workers' compounds and took photographs at night while holding a flashlight in her free hand. She sent three African employees of the *Guardian* to secretly investigate a price-fixing racket in the sugar industry. (Zug 2007, 90)

Her introduction to journalism was unorthodox, and yet it made perfect sense for someone steeped in the political debates of the period. From the outset she was, as Gavin Williams

described her, ‘a campaigning journalist’ (Williams cited in Wieder 2013). She often wrote up to 16 articles a week for the paper, and from the 1948 elections through to the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955 she wrote weekly editorials. Her style could best be described as one that communicated a radical sense of urgency. Her late husband, Joe Slovo, suggested that she always had too much on her plate, too many deadlines before her, and that her ‘facility for the flow of words was sometimes an impediment to a more finished structure’ (in Pinnock 1992). From the start, her writing defied the conventions of detached objectivity. Her writing was personal, but never individualist. She was present within the piece, but only to lend support to the political causes she supported or to express her utter revulsion at the world around her. While her prose is often deadly serious, decrying creeping fascism and violent racism, her work lends itself to a certain dry humour – something that was perhaps necessary in the telling of otherwise bleak tales.

The 1946 strike launched her career as a journalist, and occurred against a backdrop of political developments and realignments that would pave the way for the election of the National Party and the introduction of apartheid policy in 1948. The ascendancy of the National Party was, as O’Meara (1983) has argued, not a victory of a rigid and reactionary Afrikanerdom over the modernising forces of non-racial capitalism. Rather, it represented an alignment of class forces and organisations behind an ideological orientation that worked to secure a form of racial capitalism beneficial to specific social classes, particularly those of agricultural capital who had complained of chronic labour shortages in rural areas. Seen in this context, Afrikaner nationalism ‘is a historically specific . . . fractured and differentiated response of various identifiable and changing class forces to contradictions and struggles generated by the development of capitalism in South Africa’ (16). Underpinning these political changes was large-scale African urbanisation, which the state attempted to resolve through various influx control measures.

The outbreak of the Second World War generated an industrial boom that in turn increased demand for skilled and semi-skilled positions. Between 1936 and 1946, the urban African population grew by 57.2%, outstripping the urban white population (Posel 1991, 26). Mass production in wartime factories created semi-skilled positions which fell outside the existing colour bar classifications of skilled (white) and unskilled (African). In order to meet industrial labour demands, Prime Minister Jan Smuts allowed for the dilution of segregationist policies and African workers were drawn into semi-skilled positions, albeit at wage rates considerably lower than those of white workers. The growth of manufacturing in South Africa’s cities was fuelled by an abundant supply of cheap labour, although this generated significant challenges to the preservation of white political supremacy. Two competing reports emerged in this period that proposed different solutions to African urbanisation. The United Party based its strategy on the 1946 Fagan Commission, which opposed total segregation and recognised that industrial growth would have to be based on ongoing African urbanisation. The National Party ran and won on the competing 1947 Sauer Report, which advocated for the ‘total apartheid between whites and Natives [as the] eventual ideal and goal’, and proposed a freeze on further African urbanisation (Sauer 1947, 3).

While Smuts acted to repress labour unrest (by unleashing a phalanx of 16,000 police on striking mine workers in 1946), it was clear that the urbanisation of the black population during the war had brought significant and lasting changes. The *Herenigde Nasionale Party* (HNP), which had risen under the leadership of D.F. Malan following the disintegration of the fusion pact between Smuts and Hertzog, emphasised the dangers of ‘swamping’ posed by African urbanisation and the potential impact on white workers’ wages. Both white urban workers and white commercial farmers were concerned about the impacts of black urbanisation, and threw their support behind the HNP in the 1948 elections.

Much of First's early reportage for *The Guardian* focused on the problems associated with the rapid urbanisation of the African population in Johannesburg. In 1923, the Smuts government gave municipalities greater powers to segregate housing and police mobility through passes. The Native Urban Areas Act stated that alternative housing arrangements for Africans removed from white areas would have to be financed by municipalities. As a result, the Act was largely ineffective and in many cities African populations lived quite centrally rather than in peri-urban townships until the 1930s (Beinart 2001, 125–126). By the late 1920s, there were around 40,000 Africans living in central Johannesburg slumyards and the population of older locations such as Alexandra and Sophiatown, closer to the city centre, increased rapidly. Concerns about blacks 'swamping' central urban neighbourhoods were widespread in 1940s Johannesburg, resulting in slum clearances and a growing squatters' movement that organised against the clearances. In a series of articles, First described the horrendous living conditions faced by residents who had been displaced to camps on the edges of Johannesburg and the movement that sprung up to fight for the rights of urban Africans.

Increasing African urbanisation also led to a shift in politics from rural to urban areas as non-European trade unions and nationalist parties began organising and reaching out to an industrial working class. Under the leadership of Dr A.B. Xuma, the ANC played a leading role in opposing segregationist policies in the 1940s, but it was the formation of the ANC Youth League in 1944 that injected a political urgency and radicalism into nationalist politics at the time. Under the direction of Anton Lembede, Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, the League pushed the ANC to assume more militant positions, as it sought to transform the party from an organisation of the African elite to one that represented the broad interests of the African population. Lembede and others were deeply inspired by the resistance of urban workers in Johannesburg, and saw in the African working class a radical current that the ANC desperately needed. Xuma's pragmatism led him to forge alliances with both the CPSA in their anti-pass campaigns and the Indian Congresses in their campaign against the Ghetto Act, both of which influenced the direction of the party's 1949 Programme of Action.

There was no formal relationship between the ANC and CPSA during this time, and the Communist Party's central committee remained a largely white body. As Tom Lodge (1983) points out, the party emphasised racial unity among black and white workers, although in practice it often came down on the side of white workers. This led the party to conclude in 1924 that 'our main revolutionary task is among the natives' (Legassick 1983, 22). By 1928, under pressure both from black members and following directives from the Soviet Union, it adopted the short-lived 'independent native republic' slogan. While the position was always vaguely defined, Lodge (1983) notes that its premise informed the future of the party and its relationship with the ANC as it put forward the view that South Africa existed within a specific form of colonialism requiring a two-stage revolution. First would later become a fierce critic of this two-stage theory, describing it as mechanistic and abstracted from real struggles: 'the national and the class struggle are not part of some natural order of succession, but take place coterminously' (First 1978, 98).

At the time of its dissolution in 1950, the CPSA's (predominantly white) central committee began to review its position on the nationalist movement and emphasised the need for collaboration with the ANC. First was close to a number of prominent African communists from this period, including J.B. Marks, Dan Thloome and Moses Kotane, and it was largely through these figures that the CPSA was able to forge connections with the broader movement in the 1950s. It was through these realignments and what Slovo described as a process of 'broadening out' that the South African Communist Party began to theorise colonialism of a special type and advance the idea of a national democratic revolution.

A number of factors contributed to First's political and intellectual development during this period. Her upbringing in an intensely political family played no small role, although her formative experiences occurred when she became involved in support for the 1946 miners' strike. During this stage of her life it is difficult to separate her political involvement from her journalist work – both *The Guardian* and *Inkululeko* were connected to the CPSA. Shula Marks (1983, 124) has suggested that her political perspective was 'shaped by distress at American imperialism in South East Asia, and the horrors of the cold war and a belief in the enormous strides made by the backward countries like Russia and China as they threw off the shackles of the past'. While she would later dissent from the Communist Party's pro-Soviet line, there is nothing in these early scrapbooks to suggest that she questioned the positions of the central committee. What stands out, however, is her commitment to highlighting issues that directly affected workers and the African population living in Johannesburg's new urban slums. Three themes in her writing from this period stand out and appear at regular intervals in her scrapbooks.

The anti-Indian boycott and Afro-Asian solidarity

In response to white voter concerns over non-European business ownership in urban centres, the Smuts government introduced the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act in 1946, also known as the Ghetto Act. The Act was designed to curtail Indian property ownership in white areas of Natal and the Transvaal, stating that Indians were no longer entitled to buy property in white areas but had to rent it from white landowners for a fee. The second part of the Act was devoted to the political representation of Indians: two Europeans would represent Transvaal and Natal Indians in the Senate and three Europeans in the House of Assembly. The Act was an attempt, in the words of South African Indian Congress leaders Yusuf Dadoo and Monty Naicker, to 'strangle Indian economic life, social progress and political aspirations' (First 1947a). Its implementation led to the rise of the Indian passive resistance campaign, which, although it was unsuccessful at repealing the legislation, impressed upon the ANC the urgent need for militant direct action (Lodge 1983, 27–30).

The Act inspired fierce opposition from the Indian community and international condemnation. During a historic mass march of over 15,000 people in Durban in 1946, 17 passive resisters pitched five tents on a vacant piece of municipal land in opposition to the Act. They were soon charged and sentenced to hard labour. In the days that followed, passive resisters were assaulted and had their cars and tents stoned by mobs of white vigilantes. The state jailed 2000 protestors, and white businesses and political organisations organised a boycott of Indian traders. Coming shortly after the war, First and others within the Communist Party were quick to point out the connections between these actions and the rise of Nazism, or what *The Guardian* editor Brian Bunting (1969) described as the rise of the 'South African Reich'.

In response to state repression and the attacks on Indians, Drs Dadoo and Naicker travelled to India to urge the Indian government to implement economic sanctions against South Africa and to indict South Africa before the United Nations. The sanctions fuelled white anger against Indians, and in small towns around the Transvaal local politicians, white trade unionists and church groups formed boycott committees to encourage consumers to purchase solely from European-owned stores.

First noted that the boycott of Indian stores was not only guided by white supremacy, but an attempt by white business owners to capture the profits of Indian traders. The intent of the boycott, she wrote, was to 'exclude Indians from the economic life of the country so that it will not be worth their while to remain in South Africa' (First 1947b). In the town of

Vereeniging, the European Consumers Association issued a leaflet stating ‘the coolie’s neck must be broken,’ just as its representatives tried to decrease the quota of goods going from suppliers to Indian-owned stores. The Transvaal Indian Congress noted that the government ‘by being tacit to the illegal activities of the boycotters is encouraging racism’ (First 1947a). For First, the Ghetto Act was not merely an attempt at capturing the votes of working-class whites, but a deliberate attempt to undermine the economic security and independence of the Indian community.

Across Natal and the Transvaal the boycott enflamed racial tensions, which often erupted in violence against Indians or Africans. In a report from Potchefstroom, First reported on how university students picketed Indian-owned stores and how African workers were fired for frequenting Indian shops. Most disturbingly, she wrote, ‘it is reported that school teachers in the town have taken it upon themselves to give daily anti-Indian lessons to their classes’ (First 1947c).

On 31 March 1946, around 6000 demonstrators marched in Durban against the Ghetto Act. Speakers at the demonstration came from the Indian Congress, the ANC and the African People’s Organization, who endorsed the call to launch a passive resistance campaign against the Act. This campaign received limited coverage in the mainstream press, so in order to communicate its message the movement began printing its own paper, *The Passive Resister*. First began writing articles for the paper in 1947, covering the expropriation of Indian trading stands in Johannesburg. ‘Under the Ghetto Act and the Gold Law, these people will suffer a tremendous hardship,’ she wrote, ‘for these two Acts have made it virtually impossible for the Transvaal Indian community to own or occupy land or property’ (First 1947d). By May 1947, she reported on the decline of the Indian boycott in the rural Transvaal, as farmers allowed their workers to again frequent Indian-owned shops, although anti-Indian sentiment would continue for many more years.

While the boycott movement was in retreat, the Ghetto Act and other discriminatory legislation remained firmly in place. In a series of articles in *The Guardian* and *Inkululeko*, First chronicled the growing resistance to racist legislation by Indian and African organisations, and the attempts at creating linkages between African and Indian movements. Reporting from a May Day rally in Newton Market Square in Johannesburg organised by the ANC, the Indian Congress and the African People’s Organization, she described the diverse political affiliations in the crowd:

Squatters from the shantytowns surrounding Johannesburg were there; carrying banners ‘Give Us Land to Build Our Homes’; members of African trade unions; African women sitting together in a section of the vast crowd; Africans, Indians and Coloureds from all of Johannesburg’s townships and locations. (First 1947e)

The demonstrators, she wrote, resolved to fully support the pact between the leaders of the ANC and the Indian Congress, condemned the government’s attempt to annex South West Africa, and called for a meeting between the South African and Indian governments to ‘bring the treatment of South African Indians into conformity with the United Nations Charter’ (*Ibid.*). The pact referred to was signed on 9 March 1947 between the leadership of the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses and the ANC. Known as the Doctors’ Pact, it urged cooperation between non-European groups in order to obtain full citizenship rights. Today the Pact is widely seen as the precursor to the Congress of the People and the drafting of the Freedom Charter in 1955.

It was during this same period that the leaders of the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congress were making connections with the Indian Interim government, and regularly printing

letters of solidarity in *The Guardian* from Indian communist parties, women's groups and Jawaharlal Nehru. Covering their return from India, First wrote: 'Dr. Dadoo [Transvaal Indian Congress] said that India expects South African Indians to make common cause with all the oppressed people of South Africa' (First 1947f). Shortly before India's independence, Nehru released a statement that appeared in *The Passive Resister* calling on Indians in Africa to unite with the Africans against colonialism and exploitation. On 15 August of that same year, India and Pakistan became independent dominions, prompting large celebrations on the streets of Johannesburg and Durban. Covering the celebrations for *The Guardian*, First reported on how a 'monster crowd' on the steps of Johannesburg voted unanimously for the South African government 'in accepting the new status of the two dominions . . . should remove all racial discriminations against Indians in South Africa' (First 1947 g). Nehru in 1946 called on those members of the United Nations to disassociate themselves with South Africa, 'if she follows such a Nazi doctrine', while urging Indians in South Africa to struggle alongside the African people, 'for if you consider yourselves their superiors, then others will consider themselves your superiors.'²

First's journalism from this period captures both the rise of the Indian protest movement, but also the ways in which white business owners, churchmen and community leaders enflamed racial tensions. She chronicled the everyday injustices of white businessmen beating their black workers for shopping at Indian-owned stores as well as the emergence of a strong African-Indian international solidarity movement. Her scrapbooks from this period are interspersed with stories on the squatters' movement in Moroka Township, anti-pass campaigns and the conditions in mine hostels. The daily indignities faced by black South Africans were not merely symptomatic of racist mindsets, but, as she would write after the events in Soweto in 1976, of a 'capitalist social formation . . . without the features of a bourgeois-democratic state precisely because forms of labour coercion, buttressed by race and national oppression, are essential to the process of accumulation, and the politics of race rule' (First 1978, 97).

The Bethal farm labour scandal and the potato boycott

The shortage of agricultural labour in the 1940s and the mobilisation of agrarian capital in the Transvaal behind the National Party was a decisive factor in the 1948 election. The war years had seen the efflux of African labour from commercial farms to cities and subsequent attempts by the Smuts government to control the pace of African urbanisation through the pass system. Competing labour demands from commercial farmers and industrialists caused the United Party and National Party to commission reports on national labour supply. Agrarian capital ultimately threw their support behind the National Party's Sauer Commission, which stated that 'natives in urban areas should be considered migratory citizens not entitled to political and social rights,' while a national system of labour regulation and control would be established to divert labour into the various channels of agriculture, mining and urban employment (O'Meara 1983, 237).

As Martin Murray (1997) documents, among farm workers the very name Bethal was long associated with 'callous brutality, ill-treatment and violent death' (75). The incredible growth of highly profitable capitalist farming in the district was underpinned by a despotic labour regime that relied on the recruitment of indentured foreign labour who were housed in compounds 'akin to slavery' (75-78). Ruth First visited Bethal in 1947 along with the Reverend Michael Scott. She was invited to investigate labour conditions in the area by Gert Sibande, an ANC member and founder of a farm workers' union in the district. Nicknamed the 'Lion of the East' for his fearless leadership and solid political convictions,

Sibande was instrumental in supplying First and Reverend Scott with information and interview subjects they used to break the story in *The Guardian*.

On her first trip to Bethal, First interviewed Work Nyeiland, a 15-year-old farm worker from Nyasaland (present-day Malawi).

When asked to describe conditions on the farm on which he works, he silently takes off his shirt to show large weals on his shoulders and arms. He explains he has scars whipped on his back, shoulders with a sjambok. He cannot really explain why. (First 1947 h)

What they discovered in Bethal, she wrote, ‘sounds like a story from the history of some ancient slave empire’ (*Ibid.*). At the time, few black South Africans were willing to take work on farms, persistent abuse, low wages and poor living conditions being but some of the disincentives. In order to remedy these labour shortages, Bethal farmers formed a labour-recruiting organisation. First described how recruiting officers waited at the then-Rhodesian border for illegal migrants, who were then given the option of returning home or signing a six-month work contract. At the time of writing the piece, there were 40,000 foreign contracted labourers in the Bethal district. Yet this was not merely a system confined to contractors and farmers. Farmers and government officials had recently held an emergency meeting to discuss the chronic labour shortage on commercial farms. The proposed solution was for police officers to round up ‘foreign Native labour’.

The pools of cheap labour supplied to commercial farmers in Bethal were composed not only of ‘foreign natives’ recruited on the borders. As First reveals in yet another investigative report for *The Guardian*, prisoners were often denied bail and shipped off to farms to work through their sentence:

Patrick Sebukulu is a 17-year-old African who was sentenced recently to a fine of £10 or two months imprisonment for being in possession of a dangerous weapon. But when his sister presented the £10 at the gaol she was told it was too late: he had been sold to a farmer at Koster and could not be released. (First 1947i)

Desperate for cheap labour, farmers began to pressure the government in late 1947 to import Italian and Austrian labourers to work on South African farms. In articles that appeared later that same year, First explored the dynamics of foreign labour recruitment in more detail. In interviews with labour recruiters, she learned of the competition within the industry between labour-recruiting organisations and farmers’ associations, and the poaching of labourers from recruiting agents by diamond- and gold-mining bosses. What emerges is a detailed depiction of the trade in human beings in the twentieth century, and capital’s reliance on unfree labour in its drive toward accumulation (First 1947j).

The Bethal farm labour scandal prompted a government investigation into labour conditions, which, unsurprisingly, had little impact. On Christmas Day 1947, *The Guardian* ran yet another article on Bethal where it was reported that those who had come forward to complain about mistreatment had been victimised. Members of the ANC in the Bethal district reported to delegates at a party congress that workers were still locked up in compounds after the work was done, and then driven out the following day with whips and dogs.

Almost a decade passed before First returned to Bethal to investigate the conditions of farm workers in South Africa’s cheap labour economy. In a 1956 issue of *Fighting Talk*, she reported from a hospital bed where a young man had tried to cut his throat. ‘The reason?’ she asks. ‘His pass was not in order.’ In 1952 the National Party government brought in the Pass Laws Act, which required all black South Africans over the age of 16 to carry a pass

book. ‘The pass laws are a nightmare,’ she writes. ‘Young men grow up gnawed by fear of the policeman or plain clothes detectives at the next corner’ (First 1956). Many of those arrested for pass violations found themselves shipped off to the nearest farm, often in the Bethal district, where they carried out their sentences doing backbreaking labour.

Writing for publications like *Fighting Talk* gave her the opportunity to expand her writing beyond mere reportage and incorporate historical, economic and political analysis. The pass laws and police violence are not about crime prevention or protection, as apartheid bureaucrats proclaim:

Cowed, controlled, docile labour without the right to bargain for a better job, to compete in any labour area other than the one in which he is pegged as a work seeker. That is nearer the truth. (*Ibid.*)

The creation of an unfree labour regime was essential to the development of South African capitalism, something First realised as she quoted at length from statements from the Transvaal Chamber of Mines: ‘Large and constantly increasing numbers of Natives are required for the mining industry, and service on farms, and at present excessive wages are being demanded.’³

While she played a major role in uncovering the ‘new slavery’ in Bethal for *New Age*, *Fighting Talk* and other publications, other publications like *Drum*, under the editorship of Henry Nxumalo, played a key role in continuing to expose labour abuses. In 1952 Nxumalo went undercover, posing as a farm labourer in order to gain material for *Drum*’s first major investigative story ‘Bethal Today’. The magazine also uncovered a dossier of trials of cases of beatings in Bethal in the 1940s, including one case in which a worker was beaten to death in 1944.⁴ Their muck-raking journalism generated significant controversy and led to one of the first ANC commodity boycotts. On 31 May 1959 the South African Congress of Trade Unions launched a countrywide potato boycott to protest against ‘farm slavery’.

The campaign had an immediate impact. In July 1959, in an article for *New Age*, First went to Bethal to find that some farmers had returned their entire labour force to the government labour bureau in Johannesburg. Court actions – presumably initiated by Congress Alliance leaders on behalf of the workers’ families – forced at least six farmers in Bethal to abandon the forced labour scheme. The Congress Alliance called off the boycott in September 1959, with posters declaring ‘Potato Boycott Lifted. A Victory for the People. A Warning for the Farmers.’ The success of the potato boycott was a pivotal moment in the anti-apartheid struggle, and served as an inspiration for future consumer boycotts and acts of civil disobedience. The 1960s saw the boycott as a weapon against apartheid spread to the international scene, with anti-apartheid groups in Europe and North America calling for a boycott of South African imports.

First’s writing on Bethal can be seen as a precursor to her later work on the role of the South African mining industry in plundering the Mozambican countryside for cheap labour (First 1983). While she would go on to explore these issues at the Centre of African Studies at Eduardo Mondlane University, her early journalism contained insights drawn from sociological, political and economic theory, and were almost always attempts at locating the underlying causes of strikes, protests or boycotts.

The fight against ‘South African fascism’

While South Africa ultimately sided with the allies in the Second World War, it was by a slim majority vote in Parliament, and many Afrikaners, Hertzog among them, were firmly against siding with the British. Smuts’ support for the allies ultimately split the

fusion government, and Hertzog's antiwar followers joined Malan's Reunited National Party. While neither Malan nor Hertzog came out in direct support of the Nazis, a number of key ideologues of Afrikaner nationalism were heavily influenced by Nazi ideology. Dr Nic Diedrechs, Dr Piet Meyer and future prime minister Henrik Verwoerd were exposed to German philosophy and Nazi propaganda during the 1920s and 1930s, which 'helps to explain the influence of *herrenvolk* ideas on Afrikaner political thinking' (Terreblanche 2002, 301).

Support for the Nazi cause also existed among the ranks of the Afrikaner working class. In 1933 Louis Weichardt founded the South African Christian National Socialist Movement, popularly known as the Greyshirts, and inspired by the outbreak of violent anti-Semitism in Germany. In 1939, the Ossewa-Brandwag (OB) emerged as a right-wing Afrikaner nationalist movement opposed to South Africa's alliance with Britain, and for a time acquired a significant following. Another group that emerged was the New Order (NO), which in 1942 had 17 parliamentary representatives, all elected under the United Party, and advocating for an Afrikaner version of national socialism.

While certain party ideologues were influenced by national socialism and historical animosity caused some Afrikaner politicians to support Germany, it is a mistake to characterise the National Party and its leadership as entirely proto-fascist. As Patrick Furlong (1991) has argued, Malan sought to distance the party from pro-Axis groups that emerged during the early phases of the war. In 1941 the National Party encouraged its members to resign from the OB and NO. By the 1943 election, the Party had distanced itself sufficiently from both groups.

While support for these groups dropped after the war, they continued to play a role in South African politics. Much of First's early journalism for *New Age* and *The Guardian* focused on the role of these groups in Johannesburg's political scene in the immediate postwar period. It is also worth remembering that it was during this time that she met Joe Slovo, a recently returned veteran of the war, and an active member of the Springbok Legion, a progressive soldiers' union that preached anti-fascism and included a number of CPSA members. Many of those Jewish immigrants who joined the Communist Party, such as First's parents, had experienced the trauma of anti-Semitism both in Europe and upon their arrival in South Africa. Israel and Adams (2000) have argued that the existence of a disproportionate number of Jews in the Communist Party meant it was easy for the National Party to utilise a range of anti-Semitic stereotypes to quash communist activity.

The first instances of her writing on the subject appear in *The Guardian* in early 1947, where she documents the transformation of the fascist Greyshirt movement into the 'S.A. White Worker's Party', although the story notes that the first meeting was small and is unlikely to attract attention. Later that year however, under the headline 'Mob Violence in Jo'burg: Brutal Attacks by Fascist Thugs', she covered the Greyshirts' role in a number of attacks on Communist Party members on the steps of Johannesburg's city hall. Greyshirts were also reportedly following 'young Jewish lads' home, assaulting them and hurling stones through their windows. Following a CPSA meeting, 'Thirty-year-old Natie Marcus was assaulted by about 40 people who chased him through the streets, shouting "Get the Jews," cornered him with his back to the window and hit him with a baseball bat' (First 1947 k).

In a more reflective telling of the incident for *The Democrat*, First warns that European fascism had similar beginnings in organised violence against Communist Party meetings. In these instances fascism was aided both by the police, who tended to turn a blind eye, and liberals who considered the attacks as 'strife between extremist rival factions' (First 1947l). The attacks on Communist Party members, Jews and non-Europeans outside Johannesburg city hall resulted in no arrests, and nationalist politicians debated banning all political meetings on city hall steps. Which, as she points out, was the aim of the Greyshirts all along.

Later that year, in a front-page story for *The Guardian*, First exposed fascist attempts to sell segregation and apartheid to the African population. In 'S.A. Fascists Try to Woo African People', she documents how fascists, under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Church, had initiated meetings with groups of Africans in order to 'promote cooperation and understanding between the two groups based on apartheid' (First 1947 m). In the shadows of these meetings lurked the OB, which, it seemed, was behind an organisation known as the 'African National Improvement League'. In an interview with the League's leader, First discovers that the League's chief aim is to spread the OB's version of national socialism and separate development among the African population. 'The fascists must be beginning to realise', she writes, 'that a united, militant African movement stands four-square in the way of an extension of fascism in this country. If they cannot hope to obliterate this movement, they can at least divide and confound it' (*Ibid.*).

On 26 May 1948, Malan's National Party was voted into power on the platform of apartheid. It is during this decisive phase in the country's history that a discussion of apartheid as a form of political rule reminiscent of European fascism emerges in First's writing. Shortly before the elections, First interviewed members of the Transvaal Indian Congress who explained: 'What Germany experienced under the Hitler regime would be experienced by the South African people under Malan's regime should such a regime ever be established here' (First 1948a). A week after the election results, the *Guardian* ran an article in which *Inkululeko* editor Edwin Mofutsanyana argued that while despair and fear gripped progressive forces, and the non-European population, it was not productive. 'The only way out for the progressive and democratic movement is to come together and rally against fascism' (First 1948b).

Future issues of *The Guardian* struggled to come to grips with what apartheid would mean in practice and whether it was even possible. In an article titled 'Apartheid, a Political Catchword, Says Tloome', a leader of the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions commented: 'I can't see how apartheid can work in a country which relies on African labour' (First 1948c). At the same time, many of those in the ANC and the Indian Congresses could see what was on the horizon. Both Dadoo and Naicker warned mass meetings in the Transvaal and Natal that 'the policy of apartheid would mean the creation by brute force of a permanent body of cheap labour for mines and the farms. Call the plan apartheid. Call it even segregation. The outcome will be a fascist, police state in this country' (First 1948d).

The changes were swift. By August 1948 trains in suburban Cape Town were fully segregated, and a 'Train Apartheid Resistance Committee' had been struck. By December of that year the ANC had held its first convention under the National Party government. Reporting from the convention in Bloemfontein, First described how attendees debated the use of strikes, civil disobedience, the boycott of segregatory institutions and non-cooperation in order to defeat apartheid. In July 1949 the National Party had outlawed mixed marriages between black and white through the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act. In September 1949, reporting from Cape Town, she exposed how a government proclamation would soon make it illegal for trade unions, as well as the ANC and the Communist Party, to collect dues from non-Europeans, 'crippling the development of organisation among the African people' (First 1948e).

Conclusion

It is in First's scrapbooks from late 1948 to 1950 that we begin to understand the impact apartheid policies had on her, her close comrades and her family life. Her hopes for a unified trade

union movement of black and white workers were dashed when in 1950 the Trades and Labour Council supported the exclusion of African unions. On May Day of that same year a march was held to protest against the increase in segregation laws, and police gunned down 18 marchers in Alexandra Township. Her first daughter was born the same year the Suppression of Communism Act was introduced, which named both her and her husband. The following year, after a trip to the Soviet Union, she faced her first banning order.

Through these scrapbooks, one gets a sense of her remarkable writing ability, her knowledge of both South African and international politics, and her deep commitment to socialism. The Bethal article, in particular, demonstrates her robust knowledge of South African political economy, and the role of influx controls in maintaining the cheap labour economy. As Marks (1983) has suggested, her work on the Bethal farm labour scandal and her later work on migrant labour and the gold mines anticipated much of the revisionist-liberal debates of the 1970s on the relationship between apartheid and capitalism. Her later work with Aquino de Braganca, founder of the Centre of African Studies at Eduardo Mondlane University, was focused on similar themes, as she attempted to unravel the economic (under)-development of Mozambique through its export of cheap labour to South Africa's mines. Yet the aim of her work in Mozambique was never merely academic, but intended to document and analyse the system of labour power in order 'to contribute to the process of breaking out of colonialism and capitalism' (First 1982, 23).

She was never, as Ralph Miliband put it, a 'utopian revolutionary', although she never had 'the slightest doubt about the justice of her cause or the urgent need to strive for its advancement' (Miliband 1982, 313–314). In her writings on migrant labour in Mozambique, for example, she is vehement that changing the migrant labour system is not as simple as ideological denunciations against exploitation by South African mining capital. Understanding how the political economy of the migrant labour system operated was crucial in putting an end to it, and, she argued, 'a necessary pre-requisite for the creation of a material base for the construction of socialism' (First 1982, 24).

In a review of her work, her close friend and co-editor of the *Review of African Political Economy*, Gavin Williams (1996), noted that underlying her journalism was a sense that the focus of social explanation should be on capitalism and that socialism, while difficult to achieve, was a worthy goal. Yet her commitment to socialism was somewhat unorthodox for the time, particularly within the political circles she travelled in. She was far more sceptical of the Soviet Union than other South African communists, and, according to her husband, Joe Slovo, was critical of the party's unconditional support for the Soviet Union well before the crimes of Stalinism became known. In an interview with Don Pinnock (1992), which can be accessed through the Ruth First Papers Project, Slovo notes that while she was a committed Marxist, 'new strands of Marxism, particularly the thinking of the new left, came to influence her far more than the rest of us.' Her deviation from the party line on certain positions caused significant tensions, with the most hardened Stalinists on the central committee wanting to expel her for her public scepticism of the Soviet Union. While there is nothing in her early writing that reflects this scepticism, there is, as Pinnock has written elsewhere, a sense that she is 'inducing the reader to take an active part in the formation of ideas' rather than parroting the party line (2012, 27).

This article is hardly a definitive account of her early journalism and its influence over her political development, but it does suggest that her work played a crucial role in publicising numerous struggles against racism, segregation and capitalism. It is increasingly important to unpack her writing and situate it within the political context of twentieth-century South Africa in order to resist the increasing institutionalisation of liberation figures in South Africa. Within South Africa her legacy is kept alive through a range of

scholarships and lecture series and within the pages of the South African Communist Party's publications *Umsebenzi* and *African Communist*. While this is not objectionable, it is important to emphasise the critical thinking she valued over pre-packaged dogma and her commitment to a radically transformative politics.

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Notes

1. The underlying research materials for this article can be accessed at www.ruthfirstpapers.org.uk/
2. Nehru quoted in Pachai (1971, 192).
3. Annual Report of Transvaal Chamber of Mines, 1895, cited in First (1956).
4. "National Potato Boycott Starts." South African History Online. Accessed June 5, 2014. <http://v1.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/thisday/1959-05-31.htm>

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