

ACADEMICS AND AGITATORS: WHITE WOMEN IN THE ANTI-APARTHEID
MOVEMENT

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List of Acronyms

ANC: African National Congress

CPSA: Communist Party of South Africa

FOPS: Federation of Progressive Students

ISL: International Socialist League

MK: Umkhonto weSizwe

PAC: Pan Africanist Congress

SACP: South African Communist Party

SAIC: South African Indian Congress

SACOD: South African Congress of Democrats

YCL: Young Communist League

In 1994 Nelson Mandela took office as the first democratically elected president of South Africa, symbolizing the end of apartheid and the beginning of a new era for the country. In the nearly 50 years leading up to Mandela's election, countless activists worked tirelessly in the fight against the repressive apartheid regime. These activists were overwhelmingly African and male. There were, however, members of the resistance who were white and female. Whether they were writing literature or participating in the armed struggle, white women were involved in every sphere of the anti-apartheid movement.

These women all wanted to see a South Africa that was free and fair for all of its citizens; they shared mutual colleagues and were members of organizations that worked to advance that goal. Ruth First is one of the foremost female figures of the anti-apartheid movement. She was known as a great intellect and eventually became an academic, working for universities in both the United Kingdom and Mozambique. Conversely, Eleanor Kasrils was a member of the underground resistance who committed acts of violence and recruited freedom fighters into South Africa. Both women shared similar experiences in their adolescences, so it is interesting that their methods of advancing the anti-apartheid movement differed so greatly. Although they had the same goal for South Africa, the each woman's representation of her gender and her view of communism helped shape her style of activism in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Ruth First

Ruth Heloise First was born on May 4, 1925 and spent the early years of her life in Kensington, an upper-middle-class white neighborhood in Johannesburg, South Africa. Her

parents, Julius and Tilly First, were born in Latvia and Lithuania respectively.¹ Like many Eastern European Jews, they fled to South Africa to avoid the pogroms following the death of Tsar Alexander II. The two were interested in socialist politics and exposed First and her younger brother Ronald to leftist ideas, often taking them to hear communist speakers on the town hall steps.²

In 1941 First graduated from Jeppe Girls High School and matriculated at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. During her time in college, she lived at home with her parents and brother. It took her five years to obtain a degree in Social Sciences, which can probably be attributed to the many extra-curricular activities with which she was involved. She recalls that her time at Wits was “cluttered with student societies, debates, mock trials, general meetings, and the hundred and one issues of war-time and post-war Johannesburg that returning ex-service students made so alive.”³ One of the student societies that First was involved in was the Federation of Progressive Students (FOPS), which she helped found.

Her participation in campus political organizations was not her focus, however. First was far more interested in politics on a national level, and she became a member of the Young Communist League (YCL) and eventually of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in the Johannesburg West branch. This interest in national politics was natural for many students at Wits including First, who wrote in her memoir that “on a South African campus, the student issues that matter are national issues.”⁴

Upon her graduation from Wits in 1946 First began working at the Johannesburg City Council but resigned soon after due to the monotony of the job. When the 1946 African

¹ RF/6: Tilly First and Hilary Kuny, interview by Don Pinnock. “Ruth First Papers.” 1988.

² Ibid.

³ Ruth First, *117 Days* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 110.

⁴ Ibid.

Mineworkers Strike broke out, First wanted a “political job.”⁵ She began writing about African life for *The Guardian* and took multiple trips through the Transvaal and the Orange Free State where she reported on squatter camps.⁶ During one of these trips she met Joe Slovo: a fellow communist and a veteran of the Eastern Front of World War II. The two became a romantic couple in 1948 and in 1949 First became pregnant with their first daughter, Shawn. In August of that year, Ruth and Joe were married in Julius and Tilly’s home.⁷

Between 1950 and 1953, First and Slovo had two more daughters: Gillian and Robyn. The three Slovo daughters’ childhoods were shaped by their parents’ political involvement, often spending extended periods of time with Tilly when their parents were away on official Party business. Gillian Slovo recalls being affected by an African National Congress (ANC) organized boycott, in which potatoes and their by-products were banned:

For the past few months crisps, like all potatoes and their by-products, had been banned from our household in line with a countrywide ANC boycott. This was not the first time the outside world had impinged in outlandish ways: our childhoods were punctuated by incidents which were the life blood of South African protest.⁸

In May of 1950 the South African government passed the Suppression of Communism Act, which outlawed the CPSA and other organizations promoting communistic ideals.⁹ Later that month, the CPSA dissolved itself and a few years later the South African Communist Party (SACP) replaced it. First and Slovo were instrumental in the reformation of the SACP as well as the organization’s alliance with the ANC. Because of the Suppression of Communism Act, the SACP stayed underground and First and Slovo helped found the white counterpart to the ANC,

⁵ Ibid, 111.

⁶ Alan Wieder, *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid* (New York, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 57.

⁷ Ibid, 58.

⁸ Gillian Slovo, *Every Secret Thing* (New York, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 45.

⁹ Suppression of Communism Act, 44 Government Gazette § 1 (1950).

the South African Congress of Democrats (SACOD). At the time, the ANC was not yet allowing white members. The SACOD operated above-ground and was open to members of all political affiliations—that is, it was not a communist organization. Although it lasted for less than a decade before being banned, the SACOD was immensely important in the anti-apartheid movement because it united blacks and whites in the cause. Nelson Mandela wrote:

We saw the COD as a means whereby our views could be put directly out to the white public. The COD served an important symbolic function for Africans; blacks who had come into the struggle because they were antiwhite discovered that there were indeed whites of goodwill who treated Africans as equals.¹⁰

In the mid-1950s, First and her husband led lives that were largely separate. Slovo spent a lot of time away from home on confidential Party business and First's journalism kept her away for days at a time. She had become the Johannesburg editor for *The Guardian*, which due to banning orders had changed its name four times since hiring First and was now called *New Age*. She led many journalistic campaigns dealing with issues like poverty in the African townships surrounding Johannesburg, pass laws for women, and the struggles of African farm and mine workers.¹¹ First worked hard to make a name for herself in the male-dominated world of political journalism and her colleagues described her with the Xhosa phrase: “yimazi eephah neenkati,” meaning “a mare that holds its own in a race with stallions.”¹²

In 1955, the South African Congress Alliance consisting of the SACOD, the ANC, and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) unveiled the Freedom Charter. The document was the official statement of the beliefs of the Congress Alliance and declared that “South Africa

¹⁰ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (New York, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 171.

¹¹ Don Pinnock, “The Journalism of Ruth First and the *Guardian*,” in *South Africa's Alternative Press*, ed. Les Switzer (Cambridge, United Kingdom, 1997), 308-328.

¹² James Zug. *The Guardian* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 147.

belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people.”¹³ First was an important component in the writing of the document. She and her husband, along with Duma Nokwe, Pieter Beyleveld, Yusuf Cachalia, Rusty Bernstein, and Walter Sisulu, were part of a committee that was tasked with listening to the demands of the people from various regions of South Africa. After collecting the information, First then used her writing prowess to organize and present the demands to the rest of the committee, who then drafted the Freedom Charter.¹⁴ When the Charter was finally presented to the public in Kliptown, First and many others who had worked on it were not able to attend due to banning orders that prohibited them from communicating with more than one person at any given time unless they were at home.¹⁵

In December of 1956, 156 members of the Congress Alliance were arrested and charged with high treason. During what became known as the Treason Trial, the accused men stayed in a communal cell, which became, as Nelson Mandela called it, “the largest and longest unbanned meeting of the Congress Alliance in years.”¹⁶ The Treason Trial lasted until 1961 when all of the defendants were found not guilty. During the trial, First still wrote for *The Guardian* and she took over editorial duties for a magazine called *Fighting Talk*. Under her leadership, the magazine saw submissions from an impressive list of guest writers including Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu. The magazine was not limited to the South African freedom

¹³ South African Congress Alliance. *Freedom Charter*, 26 June 1955.

¹⁴ Wieder, 88.

¹⁵ Suppression of Communism Act, 44 Government Gazette § 11 (1950).

¹⁶ Mandela, 201.

struggle and ran articles by leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya.¹⁷

As the 1950s came to a close, tensions in South Africa grew higher and higher. On March 21, 1960, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) led a nation-wide protest in which thousands of black South Africans burned their passbooks. The police reacted by attacking demonstrators in Sharpeville, a township near Johannesburg, killing 69 people and injuring over 180. Following the attacks, the international community condemned the South African government. As a result of what became known as the Sharpeville Massacre, the government declared a state of emergency and banned both the ANC and PAC.¹⁸ Nine days later, Joe Slovo was arrested and First began living underground in a suburb north of Johannesburg. She continued writing for *New Age* and *Fighting Talk*, but it was becoming difficult to cover all of the protests happening around the country; activists were being banned, fleeing the country, and were being intensely monitored by the police.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the periodicals were as important as ever and her husband credited her journalism with keeping the spark alive in the toughest days.²⁰

On May 1, 1963, General Law Amendment Act number 37 was signed into law in South Africa. This law stated that the Special Branch could detain persons suspected of politically motivated crimes without a warrant. The detention could last for up to 90 days before the detainee would be allowed access to a lawyer.²¹ The law became known as the 90 Days Law. News of this habeas corpus-violating policy made headlines internationally and the Washington Post, Times Herald reported that the law introduced the death penalty for those who left the

¹⁷ Chris van Wyk, *Ruth First* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Awareness Publishing Group, 2006), 31.

¹⁸ Wieder, 113.

¹⁹ Ibid, 119.

²⁰ RF/6: Joe Slovo, interview by Don Pinnock. "Ruth First Papers." 1992.

²¹ General Law Amendment Act, 37 Government Gazette § 17 (1963).

country to receive sabotage training or advocated abroad for the forcible overthrow of the government.²²

On the night of August 9, 1963, Ruth First was working at Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand. She had recently enrolled in a course in librarianship, which she chose to pursue after the government issued a new set of bans against her. These bans prohibited her from writing, compiling material for publication, and entering newspaper premises. She described her new career as a “poor substitute” for her life as a journalist.²³ As First left the library’s reading room, two men approached her and informed her that she was being arrested under the 90 Days Law. A single issue of the banned *Fighting Talk* magazine had been carelessly left under a stack of papers in her home, and made her subject to arrest.²⁴ Her detention made her the first white woman in South Africa to be arrested under the 90 Days Law and as she entered the Marshall Square Police Station, one of the officers told the wardress in Afrikaans: “Skud haar” or “Give her a good shake-up.”²⁵

While being detained at Marshall Square, First avoided interrogation by telling officers that she could not make a statement until she had been formally charged with a crime.²⁶ Her 6-by-8 foot cell was not ideal, but she remained in good spirits for the short time she was there. Unfortunately, she was soon moved to the Women’s Central Prison in Pretoria. In her memoir, *117 Days*, First chronicled her time in prison. She titled this chapter “Isolation in a Vacuum,” and writes about her feelings of loneliness as she was kept in solitary confinement for 28 days. During her confinement, First was only allowed to have one book: the Bible. She read it more

²² "Detention Bill Near Law in South Africa," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, April 30, 1963.

²³ First, 3.

²⁴ Ibid, 4.

²⁵ Ibid, 5.

²⁶ Ibid, 46.

than once and pored over every book, memorizing proverbs and psalms and feeling connected to the sadness in Jeremiah and Lamentations.²⁷ Because the Bible was the only book that was not prohibited, she resolved that it was a symbol of apartheid philosophy and a tool meant to catalyze a confession:

...the Security Branch conceded us the Bible not to deepen our faith and understanding and improve our religious erudition, but out of deference to the Calvinist religion of the cabinet and the Nationalist Party which, mysteriously justifies apartheid policy by its interpretation of divine teaching, and could therefore deny the ballast of this theology to no prisoner, not even an atheist political. Giving us the Bible, they seemed to think, fulfilled the State's Christian duty to us as prisoners. We had the Book and our consciences in solitude; the interrogation methods of the Security Branch would, as it hoped, do the rest.²⁸

First stayed in her cell for all but 95 minutes each day. Her isolation eventually took its toll on her mental health, and she felt like she was “suspended in limbo, unknowing, unreachd.”²⁹ She was soon moved back to Marshall Square and on her 89th day of imprisonment, she received news that she would be released. Unfortunately, under the 90 Days Law, a political prisoner could be held after he had finished his sentence if the Minister of Justice deemed him a potential threat to the country.³⁰ This specific clause became known as the “Sobukwe Clause” named for Robert Sobukwe, the leader of the PAC who had called for the protests that led to the Sharpeville Massacre. Sobukwe was set to be released from prison on the day that the 90 Days Law went into effect, but because he was considered by some to be the “most dangerous black man alive,” he was held at Robben Island for six more years.³¹

²⁷ First, 58.

²⁸ Ibid, 59.

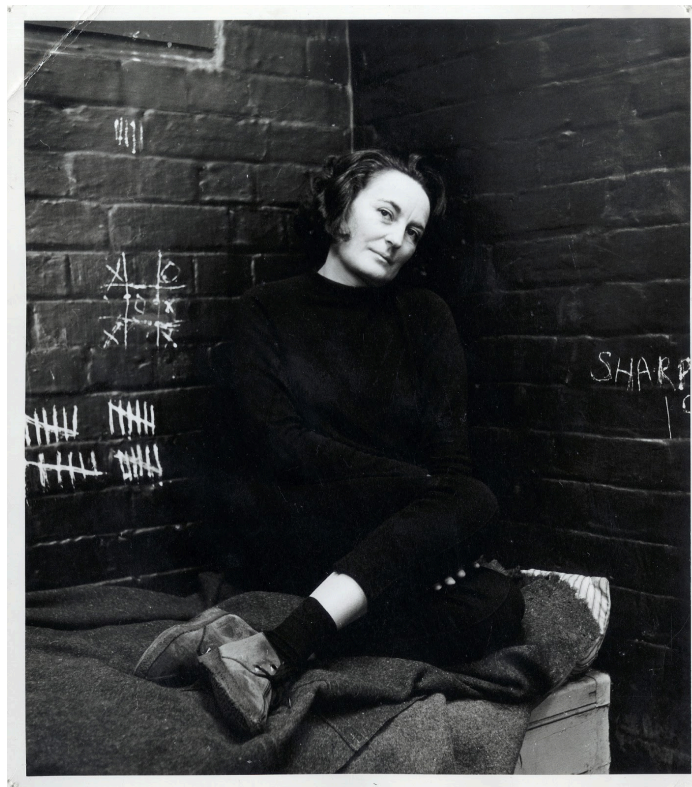
²⁹ Ibid, 65.

³⁰ General Law Amendment Act, 37 Government Gazette § 17 (1963).

³¹ Xolela Mangcu, *Biko: A Life* (New York, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 119.

With the Sobukwe Clause working against her, First was re-detained. She describes the days following the initial 90 as “grey and melancholy.”³² At this point, she was both physically and mentally ill due to the anxiety produced by constant interrogation. She knew that she could not reveal anything to the police, but it was becoming increasingly difficult and she could not risk giving up any information. Plagued by her self-doubt regarding her ability to stay quiet, First attempted suicide after writing a note apologizing for her cowardice and assuring her comrades that she had not revealed anything.³³ Weeks after her failed attempt, First was released from prison after serving a total of 117 Days.

Picture 1: Ruth First as herself in the BBC film adaptation of *117 Days*, 1965.



The Slovo Family Album and the Ruth First Papers Project.

³² First, 124.

³³ Ibid, 125.

On March 9, 1964, First received an exit permit stating that she had been approved to leave South Africa permanently. Days later, she and her daughters flew from Johannesburg to London where Joe Slovo and her father, Julius, were already living in exile. During their time in the United Kingdom, Slovo worked in the ANC offices while First had time to research and write. She published *South West Africa*, which is a short history and analysis of the effects of imperialism in South West Africa, now Namibia. In her early London days, First also wrote *117 Days*, which was later made into a movie by the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Adjusting to a new life in London was not easy for First who felt that she had, on some level, abandoned the anti-apartheid movement when she left South Africa. Slovo was often on the front lines of ANC and SACP protests and Ruth traveled frequently to Africa for research. However, Slovo soon began travelling to and from the Soviet Union and First reluctantly took on most of the domestic responsibilities. Gillian Slovo recalled that this was a source of tension in their relationship:

Those first years in England were stormy times for Ruth and Joe. Her life was a round of new ideas, of her growing confidence in the world, of international conferences and late night exchanges and of new ideas. His was full of secrets and disappointment, of trips to the Soviet Union for “consultations” or abortive attempts to kick-start the rebellion in South Africa. At home they argued passionately, fiercely, bitterly. They argued about money, about why his only contribution to the house-hold’s domestic labour was to make the salad dressing, about his continuing and urgent calls away which disrupted almost every holiday we took, but most of all they argued about politics.³⁴

Only seven years after publishing *South West Africa*, First published *Barrel of a Gun* in which she asserts: “I count myself an African, and there is no cause I hold dearer.”³⁵ Ironically, First’s life of travelling to Africa largely ended due to the success of this new book, which

³⁴ Slovo, 110.

³⁵ Ruth First, introduction to *Barrel of a Gun: Power in Africa* (New York, New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), xi.

examined military coups in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sudan. The book garnered attention from the academic community and in 1973, she was hired at Durham University where she taught courses in the sociology department.³⁶ Although she enjoyed her academic life, First longed to return to the struggle, writing, “beside a revolution, doing a teaching job is mediocre stuff.”³⁷ She left her position at Durham University in 1977 in favor of a position in the Center of African Studies at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique. Five years later, First would be killed in her Maputo office by a letter bomb sent to her by the South African government.³⁸

Eleanor Kasrils

On March 9, 1936, Eleanor Anderson Kasrils was born in Kilmarnock, Scotland. Her father was a South African student who had gone to Scotland to study engineering. As an infant, her family moved back to Durban, South Africa where she was raised. She describes her parents as socialites who were progressive for the time, always conscious of politics in South Africa as well as in Europe, especially the Spanish Civil War. Growing up, Kasrils associated with white friends because she went to an all-white school in Durban. Upon her completion of school, she enrolled in technical school where she had friends of different races.³⁹ During her adolescent years, she identified with the Liberal Party and worked in a bookshop. She married young and had a daughter, Brigid, in 1956. Soon after, Kasrils and her husband divorced.

³⁶ Wieder, 193-195.

³⁷ Aquino de Bragança and Bridget O’Laughlin, “The Work of Ruth First in the Centre of African Studies: The Development Course,” (1984), 159.

³⁸ Wieder, 251.

³⁹ Eleanor Kasrils, interview by Loyiso Pulumani and Bruce Stave for the ANC History Project. 2002.

In 1960, just weeks after the Sharpeville Massacre, Kasrils met a young member of the SACP named Ronnie Kasrils. At the time, Ronnie was involved with another woman and was temporarily staying in a house near Eleanor's. He vividly remembers their first encounter on the day of an ANC demonstration that made some of Durban's roads inaccessible:

Another of Wendy's neighbors, a young woman with striking grey eyes, was nervous because her four-year-old daughter was stuck down the road at her nursery school. I calmed her down by pointing out that the marchers were peaceful. She too was shocked by the Sharpeville shootings but, as a young mother, was apprehensive. Wendy introduced her as Eleanor. After she left, in one of those ironies of life, I remarked to Wendy and Patsy how pretty she was... Little did any of us realise how closely interlinked Eleanor's and my life would become.⁴⁰

A year passed between Eleanor and Ronnie's initial encounter and the next time they saw each other at the Durban Film Club. By this time, Ronnie and his previous girlfriend were no longer seeing each other and he began visiting Griggs Bookshop while Eleanor was working. He also bought many books at her recommendation, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The book prompted a debate between the two of them about Soviet-style communism and the west's perception of the Soviet Union.⁴¹ They continued to see each other and eventually formed a romantic relationship.

Through Ronnie, Eleanor joined the SACOD and continued to work in the bookshop where part of her job description included keeping up with new book bans and keeping those books off the shelves. When Eleanor was behind the counter, Griggs Bookshop served as a distribution center for *New Age* and *Fighting Talk*. Members of the SACP noticed Eleanor's blossoming relationship with Ronnie and she was recruited for membership by Marimuthu

⁴⁰ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2004), 20.

⁴¹ Ronnie Kasrils, *The Unlikely Secret Agent* (New York, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 40.

Pragalathan Naicker—an organizer for the Natal Indian Congress. In a 2002 interview, Eleanor emphasized the difference between the SACOD and the SACP:

I think I was the only white person in my unit of the SACP and the Congress of Democrats was a totally white group and there might have been Party members but, you know, the membership was secret, you couldn't reveal that you were a Party member except to your actual self. We all knew each other but outside that, you might suspect that people were but one never discussed that. In fact even Ronnie and I—I never told him that I'd been recruited, right? I suspected he was a member but we never discussed it. It was about at least a year before I actually revealed it and I thought I'd done a terrible thing because we were under such discipline.⁴²

Ronnie Kasrils, along with being involved with the SACP and the SACOD, was a high ranking member of Umkhonto weSizwe (MK): the armed, underground wing of the ANC. Umkhonto weSizwe is Xhosa for “Spear of the Nation” and was co-founded by Nelson Mandela. Joe Slovo was also a high-ranking member of the group. By the time Ronnie became heavily involved with MK, he and Eleanor were living together. She was soon using her position at Griggs Bookshop to order copies of Che Guvara's *Guerilla Warfare*. She became the first woman recruited to MK and her duties in the early days included running reconnaissance on the location of easily-attainable explosives and pinpointing locations for attacks.⁴³

Eleanor came of use very quickly for MK. One of the units reported a large supply of dynamite at Marion Hill, located just outside of Durban.⁴⁴ Eleanor and Ronnie drove to the store room and observed the goings-on under the guise of a young couple on a picnic. The dynamite was kept locked inside of a warehouse with a padlock. Ronnie believed that the only way to enter the warehouse was to cut the lock with a pair of wire cutters. Eleanor wanted to try a different

⁴² Eleanor Kasrils interview.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

method: she walked past the padlock and noted its name and serial number. Within days, she had visited several hardware stores and bought a key that matched the lock.⁴⁵

Soon after, a carful of MK operatives including Ronnie and future traitor Bruno Mtolo broke into the warehouse and stole as much dynamite as the car would hold.⁴⁶ The group stole so much dynamite that the intended storage facility could not hold it all and they had to find an alternate place for it. Eleanor had read about the dangers of storing explosives in a warm climate like Durban's, and the group began hiding the dynamite in any place that would stay cool enough; they kept dynamite underground and, because it was the summer holidays, they stored some in an Indian school before divvying it up between themselves and other MK branches around South Africa.⁴⁷ Some of the dynamite even made its way back to Ronnie and Eleanor's home where they taped it to the bottom of their kitchen table.⁴⁸

It was not long before the Durban branch of MK found a use for the dynamite it had acquired. The branch planned to attack the power supply in Natal Province; after much consideration, they carefully chose three electrical pylons between Durban and Pietermaritzburg, whose malfunction would cause the most widespread power outage. Ronnie Kasrils commanded one of the three units that executed the bombings.⁴⁹ Never wanting to be idle, Eleanor drove the getaway car for Ronnie's unit.⁵⁰

In December of 1962, the Durban branch of MK acted again. This time, the target was the General Post Office in the middle of the city. For this operation, Eleanor carried a homemade explosive in her shopping bag. She planted the timing device in a restroom and then walked

⁴⁵ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 40.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 41.

⁴⁸ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

⁴⁹ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 41-42.

⁵⁰ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

across the street to plant the explosive. Once the device was in place, she and Ronnie sat on a bench and waited for it to detonate. The explosion, as they had anticipated, did not kill or injure anyone but it did instill a sense of fear in those who were in the vicinity.⁵¹

By July of 1963, arrests under the 90 Days Law were escalating. Late one night, there was a knock at the door of Eleanor and Ronnie's home. Quickly, Ronnie shuffled into a trapdoor that was underneath the couple's bed. When Eleanor answered the door, she came face-to-face with two members of the Special Branch. Eleanor dodged questions about Ronnie's whereabouts for two hours, telling the police that they had ended their relationship. The police searched the house and found a copy of the Freedom Charter in a smashed frame, which convinced them that she had rejected Ronnie and his revolutionary ideas.⁵² When the Special Branch finally left, Ronnie decided that it was time for him to do the same. Eleanor's parents had property in Kloof, a town located 28 kilometers outside of Durban, and she arranged for Ronnie and some other members of the movement to stay there. Eleanor's parents, however, were under the impression that Ronnie and his cadres were botanists who wanted to study the plants in that part of Natal. The Special Branch eventually raided the house at Kloof, leading them back to Eleanor.

The police came to Griggs Bookshop one morning while Eleanor was working and took her in for questioning, telling her that she would be arrested under the 90 Days Law if she did not cooperate. She refused to give up any information regarding Ronnie or MK and her detention order was authorized, making her the second white woman in South Africa to be detained under the law. The police took Eleanor to Durban Central Prison where they asked her questions about Ronnie's whereabouts and MK operations. They also criticized her for her relationship with Ronnie, who was Jewish, saying things like, "...you mix with this communist, this Jewboy, he

⁵¹ Ronnie Kasrils, *The Unlikely Secret Agent*, 60.

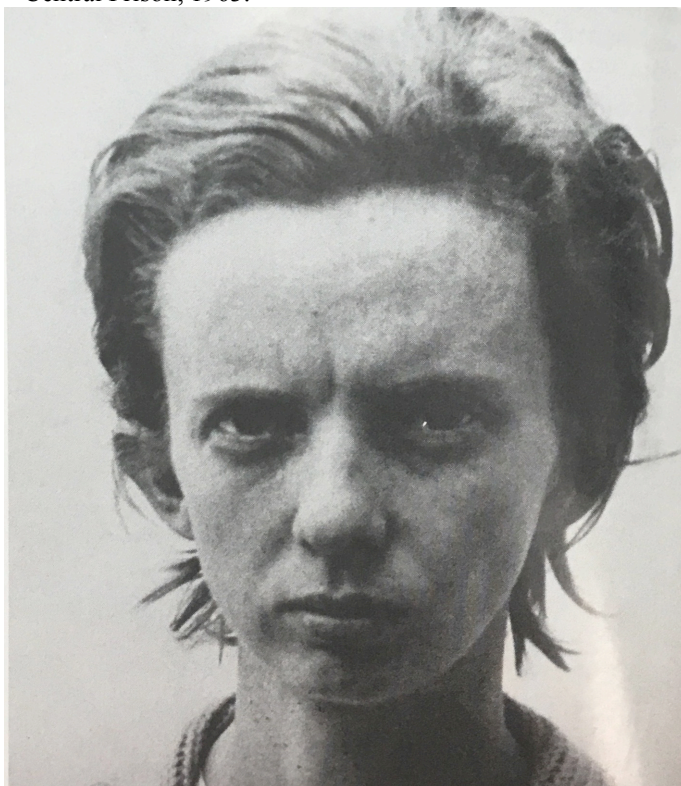
⁵² Eleanor Kasrils interview.

leaves you to face the music and now you are left alone to worry about your little girl.”⁵³ The police also frequently used Brigid as leverage:

Don’t worry missis, we Afrikaners care about children. We will take care of her for you. We will find a good home for her, decent people who will bring her up properly, in a true God-fearing way, so that she knows all about the evils of communism.⁵⁴

Eleanor’s detention was filled with constant interrogation as well as physical abuse from her interrogators.⁵⁵ She resolved to go on a hunger strike, which prompted the police to call a psychiatrist to consult her. In their meeting he informed her that he was ordering her transfer to a psychiatric hospital. Although she protested, Eleanor was moved to Fort Napier Hospital—an historic mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg.⁵⁶

Picture 2: Eleanor Anderson on a hunger strike at Durban Central Prison, 1963.



Retrieved from *Armed and Dangerous* by Ronnie Kasrils.

⁵³ Ronnie Kasrils, *The Unlikely Secret Agent*, 14. Discovered by Professor Ian Edwards.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 19.

⁵⁶ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

Once at Fort Napier, Eleanor managed to get a letter to Bram Fischer, the head of the SACP. She explained that she had been transferred to the mental asylum and that it was possible to escape. In his memoir, Ronnie Kasrils recalls Bram Fischer sharing this letter with him and their subsequent contact with the Pietermaritzburg MK branch to orchestrate an escape plan for Eleanor.⁵⁷ After a month, Eleanor acted alone and escaped without any help from MK. She spoke about the event in 2002:

I had kept a dress because you wore your own clothes. I'd kept one dress that nobody had seen there under the mattress and early in the morning this morning, the cleaner came into my room and I said to her, "I've got to get out of here." And she said—you know what she said to me? She obviously knew why I was there. She said the boys had been going to Botswana. So I said, "right." She said, "I'm going to unlock the door and I'm going to walk away and I'm going to come back 15 minutes later. I can't do any more than that. So I got out. That's how I got out...I then changed into my dress that no one had seen me in. I had stolen ten shillings from one of the alcoholics and a plastic basket so that I looked "normal" and I went to the door."⁵⁸

Upon leaving Fort Napier, Eleanor went to an Indian shop in town where she telephoned a member of the local MK branch. Minutes later, she was in his car: a successful escape.

For weeks, Eleanor stayed with a Liberal Party member before being taken to a large house in Johannesburg. When she arrived, she became aware of someone in the basement of the house. "Who's there?" she called out. A voice responded, "Eleanor, is that you?" Just then the basement door opened and Ronnie emerged.⁵⁹ Weeks passed and the time came for them to leave the country. Ronnie and Eleanor disguised themselves as a Punjabi couple; Eleanor wore white

⁵⁷ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 52.

⁵⁸ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

trousers and a purple overdress with gold jewelry.⁶⁰ She mixed her foundation with Nescafe to darken her complexion and dyed her hair black.⁶¹ The couple left Johannesburg in a car with Julius First, Ruth First's aging father who was also on the run, and they headed for Lobatse in the British protectorate of Bechuanaland. Eleanor, Ronnie and Julius only stayed there for two weeks before taking a charter flight to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

In Tanzania, Ronnie and Eleanor lived in the military training camps. Every day, Ronnie went for training while Eleanor worked in the ANC office. Dar es Salaam is Arabic for "Haven of Peace," and for Ronnie and Eleanor it was exactly that. They spent the remainder of 1963 walking along the Indian Ocean and learning Swahili phrases.⁶² Dar es Salaam was also a center of refuge for other African liberation movements, so the couple was surrounded by like-minded people from Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. In South Africa and around the continent, Eleanor's dramatic escape from Fort Napier was sensationalized. Picture 3 shows an article written about her in the *Tanganyika Standard* titled: "Refugee Tells Of Starvation: Woman Flees To Dar After Escape From S.A. Asylum."

Their bliss was interrupted in 1964 when Ronnie was sent for nine months of training in the Soviet Union. When he returned in December, the couple married in a ceremony with only two witnesses. The toast was given by fellow SACP member J.B. Marks who parodied the MK manifesto, ("The time comes in the life of any nation when there are only two choices: to submit or fight") saying: "The time comes in any man's life to stop being indecisive and to seize the lioness lurking in the forest by the tail."⁶³

⁶⁰ Ronnie Kasrils, *The Unlikely Secret Agent*, 129.

⁶¹ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

⁶² Ronnie Kasrils, *The Unlikely Secret Agent*, 148-149.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 166.

Shortly after their marriage, Eleanor became pregnant with her second child, Andrew. During her pregnancy, she contracted malaria and it was decided that she should seek medical attention in London. Because she was born in Scotland, she was able to apply for a British passport. It was granted and Eleanor and Ronnie flew to the United Kingdom where they lived and worked among other ANC members including Ruth First and Joe Slovo, who helped the Kasrils settle into their new flat.⁶⁴

The *Tanganyika Standard*, November 1963. The Ronnie Kasrils Collection at the University of the Witwatersrand.

⁶⁴ Wieder, 152-153.

Picture 3: An article about Eleanor Kasrils from the *Tanganyika Standard*, 1963.

**WOMAN FLEES TO DAR AFTER
ESCAPE FROM S.A. ASYLUM**

TANGANYIKA STANDARD. NOV. 1963.

A YOUNG woman who was sent to a mental hospital six days after she had been detained by the South African security police; who was put in jail in solitary confinement under the 90-day detention law; who went on a starvation strike because of the "injustice" of her arrest, and who escaped from the closely-guarded asylum, yesterday told the "Tanganyika Standard" her story.

She is 26-year-old Mrs. Eleanor Anderson, mother of a young daughter and only child of Mr. and Mrs. J. Logan of Durban, Natal. This frail young woman, with dark hair and blue eyes escaped unaided from Fort Napier Mental Hospital, Pietermaritzburg, about 40 miles from the Natal capital and "came to Dar es Salaam."

Mrs. Anderson said she did not know why she had been arrested. She had attended meetings of the South African Congress of Trade Unions and the Natal Indian Congress, neither of which are banned.

She was also a friend of Mr. Kasrils who has also escaped from South Africa and who was a member of the now banned Congress of Democrats.

'Hang me or break me'

It was about the whereabouts of Mr. Kasrils that she was continuously questioned by the Security Police. She said she was not a member of the African National Congress.

Mrs. Anderson was going about her work in a Durban bookshop when she was confronted on the morning of August 19 by two security police who said they wanted her for questioning.

She was taken to Wentworth police station, near the city, and there subjected to hours of questioning by five or six officers.

She said: "The security officer in charge told me that if I did not give them the name of Mr. Kasrils they would hang me or break me."



MRS. ELEANOR ANDERSON

The flat was an important part of ANC operations in London. Before their arrival, ANC members had constructed a secret room disguised as a cupboard. The room was used solely for political work. The room held maps, a facility to print photographs, and desks where multiple ANC members could work at once.⁶⁵ In London, Eleanor had many tasks. Because Ronnie was devoting all of his time to the ANC and was travelling frequently, Eleanor became the main source of income for the family, which now included a second son named Christopher. Eleanor worked as a geology technician for the London Educational Authority and took care of her children, but she remained active in the ANC's operations in London. After her death, her comrade Bill Anderson wrote:

⁶⁵ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

Throughout the years of exile London was an important sphere of the underground struggle... Eleanor was a supremely good people-person. She had a particular ability—a mix of the personal and political—to recruit non-South African sympathisers into the struggle, and to persuade them to do some pretty brave things... Safe houses, couriers, reconnaissance missions—Eleanor handled them all.⁶⁶

Eleanor lived in London for 26 years—longer than anywhere else, even Durban. Between 1977 and 1992, Ronnie and Eleanor only saw each other once a year.⁶⁷ With the advent of the 1990s, though, Eleanor and her sons returned to South Africa where she worked in the ANC office for Oliver Tambo until his death in 1993.

The year 1994 brought major changes for the Kasrils family as well as South Africa as a whole. Upon Nelson Mandela's election, Ronnie was appointed to the Transitional Executive Council's Sub-Council on Defence and was eventually made Deputy Minister of Defence later that year. In 2001, the Amnesty Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission granted Eleanor and Ronnie amnesty for their involvement in early MK activities. Eleanor suffered a stroke on November 8, 2009 and died shortly after.

Making a Connection

Almost all protest movements have leaders with differing perspectives on how to go about achieving their goal. It is not uncommon for a single movement to have two figureheads who are in search of the same—or very similar—outcome, but whose ideologies contrast starkly with one another. However, it is often not difficult to understand where those differences in ideology originate. One of the most notable examples of this in American history is the leadership during the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—after his

⁶⁶ Ronnie Kasrils, "Eleanor Kasrils: A Eulogy," *Communist Review*, no. 57 (2010): 28.

⁶⁷ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

departure from the Nation of Islam—both wanted equal rights between whites and African Americans, but they had drastically different ideas about how to achieve that goal. Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for a peaceful movement characterized by civil disobedience and a goal of integration and universal enfranchisement. Conversely, Malcolm X called for a Pan-Africanist, black nationalist movement that would utilize violence if it was necessary.

The two men's differences in ideology can be traced back to their childhoods, which were extremely different. Martin Luther King Jr. was brought up in a home that was caring and supportive. Although he experienced racism in his childhood, he was always supported by his father, a Baptist minister, and was surrounded by others who had shared similar experiences. Malcolm X's childhood was more turbulent; he tragically lost his father at a young age and his mother was mentally unstable. He lived in foster care and went to predominantly white schools where he developed an inferiority complex because of his race. He longed for acceptance and eventually found it with the Nation of Islam.

Ruth First was an academic, who wrote some of Africa's most important literature on politics and economics. Eleanor Kasrils, on the other hand, chose a form of activism that culminated in the destruction of property. Both women were born to white, upper-middle class families, with whom their political beliefs were a great source of tension. First and Kasrils both joined the SACP, the SACOD, and the ANC. The two were the first white women to be arrested under the 90 Days Law and they both went into exile following their releases. Both women were married to men who thought highly of each other and were high ranking members of MK and the SACP (see picture 4). Given the similarities, one has to wonder why the two women chose styles of activism that varied so greatly.

Picture 4: Chris Hani on stage at a SACP rally. Ronnie Kasrils and Joe Slovo look on, 1990.



The Mail and Guardian, January 24, 2010.

The Role of Gender

Pre-apartheid South Africa was a time of extreme gender inequality. While African women were expected to tend to agricultural duties or work as servants in white homes, white woman generally did not work outside of the home. White South African women could not hold public office and they did not gain the right to vote until 1930. African society was equally as skewed against women who were not allowed to join the ANC from the time it was founded in 1912 until 1943.⁶⁸

Early 20th century South Africa, like many other societies, was very patriarchal. With the rise of the nationalist apartheid regime, white men—and especially white law enforcement—took on the role of the protector of their women. Not only did they feel that they needed to protect

⁶⁸ “History of Women’s Struggle in South Africa,” *South African History Online*. Published March 21, 2011. Accessed February 27, 2017.

white women from Africans, but also from Jews and communists. In *The Unlikely Secret Agent*, there is a scene during Kasrils's interrogation in which the officer attempts to convince her that her relationship with Ronnie is the cause of all her troubles and implies that turning him in will make her life better:

Why is it that there are so many Jews in the communist party of this and other democratic countries? It is disturbing... Now Kasrils—another Jew—has got you into the mess you are in... You've made a mistake. You can go back to your little daughter, your parents, your job. Pull back from the life Kasrils has dragged you to. You don't belong with the ANC and the communists.⁶⁹

Ruth First did not accept feminism until late in her life. In 1970, First spoke about pioneering South African feminist Olive Schreiner on a BBC radio broadcast. Three years later, André Deutsch Limited commissioned a biography about Schreiner's life.⁷⁰ First asked British Feminist Ann Scott to work on the project with her, saying that she felt she did not understand things that might be obvious to young feminists.⁷¹ Although Schreiner has been criticized for her sometimes patronizing view of African society, she was certainly ahead of her time on issues like feminism and anti-colonialism. Schreiner's life was a major influence on First, and fellow ANC member Pallo Jordan spoke of the connection between the two women, saying:

There was a misperception at that time that women who were successful in that male world were very harsh on other women. I think Ruth used to have a little bit of that. It changed as she started doing the Schreiner biography because, as she used to say in her more candid moments, when it came to the issue of feminism she was a late bloomer. In other words, in a sense, she had always accepted the terms of the male-dominated and male-defined world and she was going to succeed within those parameters. She then began to interact with feminism through Olive Schreiner.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ronnie Kasrils. *The Unlikely Secret Agent*, 25-26.

⁷⁰ Ruth First and Ann Scott, acknowledgements from *Olive Schreiner* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 11.

⁷¹ Wieder, 240.

⁷² Pallo Jordan, interview by Alan Wieder. From "*Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid*," 240. 2011.

Much like their roles in the anti-apartheid movement, First and Kasrils's expression of gender varied. Ruth First opted to keep long, styled hair and wore ultra-feminine skirts. Kasrils, on the other hand, donned pants and short hair. Each woman's sense of style gives an insight as to her view of herself, her view of feminism, and her role in the movement.

Throughout Ruth First's life, an outward display of femininity was something that was extremely important to her. She had a reputation of being incredibly fashionable and well-kept; she went to the hairdresser twice a week and had a habit of visiting Eric Pugen, the most exclusive couturier in Johannesburg (Picture 5 shows First's typical dress during her life in South Africa).⁷³ Her style was widely admired by most, but harshly criticized by others who saw her appearance as a relic of the bourgeois class from whence she came. In Susan Brownmiller's 1984 book *Femininity*, she examines the function of clothing worn by women and concludes that skirts are meant to guide women into entering a set of conservative poses and smaller gestures that are considered "feminine." She goes on to say that women's clothing has never been designed to be functional, as functionality and practicality are masculine virtues.⁷⁴ While living in South Africa, First only wore skirts of a certain length. Although Brownmiller asserts that skirts are impractical articles of clothing, Gillian Slovo emphasizes that her mother looked for an air of practicality in her clothing choice, writing:

Ruth's seasons were very different from Pugen's other clients: while they procured an elegant linen shift for a pre-dinner cocktail party, she was punctiliously strict about the hemline of the dress she sported as she climbed up on to some impromptu township stage.⁷⁵

Picture 5: Ruth First during the Treason Trial, 1960.

⁷³ Gillian Slovo, 37.

⁷⁴ Susan Brownmiller. *Femininity* (New York, New York: Linden Press, 1984) 85-86.

⁷⁵ Gillian Slovo, 37.



The Slovo Family Album and The Ruth First Papers Project.

Eleanor Kasrils's femininity was more understated than First's. In most photographs from the 1960s, Kasrils is shown with her hair cut short and wearing pants. If Susan Brownmiller's notions about the practicality of female clothes are correct, then it can be said that Kasrils presented herself this way because of the type of work with which she was involved. On some level, that is true—she kept her hair cut short because she was constantly in disguise. Sometimes, she had to pass as a young boy and on other occasions she was required to wear a wig. For these types of tasks, short hair is exponentially more practical.

Kasrils and First's expression of gender can be traced back to the way that each woman herself. Out of character for a woman of the time, First was very outspoken in her political life, often debating with her male comrades. Even Ronnie Kasrils wrote that he had not escaped the scathing side of her tongue.⁷⁶ Part of First's role in the movement was speaking at public rallies, which subjected her to intense scrutiny, and while she was outspoken in her political life, many of her closest friends and family members have said that she was somewhat insecure in her personal life.⁷⁷ As Jordan Pallo pointed out, she wanted to be successful within the male-defined parameters of success. Part of meeting those requirements is looking the part of a demure, refined lady.

By contrast, Eleanor Kasrils's personal role in the movement was not subjected to as much scrutiny as Ruth First's. The height of her publicity followed her 1963 escape from South Africa, which was noticed more for its sensationalism than for its advancement of the movement. Being involved in the armed struggle carried a less-than-feminine connotation and certainly was not a criterion within a man's definition of a "successful woman." This allowed her to dress practically for the mission at hand instead of dressing in a way that begged for approval from outside voices.

In the mid-twentieth century, one criterion by which a woman's success may have been measured was her ability to play the role of a supportive wife and loving mother. For First, this was an area with which she struggled. There were familial traditions that First did not hold dear. First, she never took her husband's last name; the only people to ever call her 'Ruth Slovo' were policemen and prosecutors. Second, she spent considerable time away from her family—sometimes legally mandated, sometimes by choice—and it strained her relationships with her

⁷⁶ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 150.

⁷⁷ RF/6/8: Ronald First, interview by Don Pinnock. "Ruth First Papers." 1992.

three daughters as well as her relationship with her husband. Her daughters often spent months at a time with their grandmother or a nanny. Gillian recalled in her memoir that her family was atypical in that the parents were the ones who left home instead of the children. However, Gillian also recalled her mother's constant encouragement and how she loathed weakness in everyone—even her daughters.⁷⁸ In her later years, First attempted to reconcile her relationships with her daughters, but she never got the opportunity to understand them and be accepted by them before her death.

First and Slovo's marriage was also not picture perfect. They respected one another, but their constant separation was a major source of conflict between them and there were acts of infidelity from them both.⁷⁹ The two constantly argued over politics and sometimes one would grow frustrated with the other's behavior; First, being from an upper class, felt that Slovo did not understand proper etiquette, while Slovo sometimes felt that First and her fellow academics were “too big for their boots.”⁸⁰ However, their attitudes toward each other changed while they were living in Maputo. Gillian Slovo wrote that, as she watched them, she realized that their moods had shifted and their fighting was almost playful. Then she realized:

What had helped fuel Ruth's venom was a feeling that while she had struggled for everything she had achieved, Joe's path had been much easier. She was a woman in a man's world, forced continually to prove her capabilities. Now finally she had found a home that would accept her talents, her brilliant mind, her fierce commitment, her long experience. She felt validated: she could be herself.⁸¹
Eleanor's family life also differed greatly from Ruth's.

Eleanor Kasrils gave birth to her daughter Brigid in 1956 and divorced Brigid's father shortly after. The end of the marriage, which she described as a “waste of time,” gave Kasrils a

⁷⁸ Gillian Slovo, 118.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 112.

⁸⁰ Joe Slovo interview.

⁸¹ Gillian Slovo, 120.

newfound sense of liberation and the freedom to join the struggle.⁸² However, her new life meant that she would be frequently separated from Brigid, which instilled in her a deep sense of guilt and caused her to battle with depression during her time in exile. Upon her arrival in Tanzania, Kasrils was supposed to begin military training but learned that, as a trainee, she would not be allowed to communicate with South Africa. Because communication with Brigid was a priority, she elected to do office work instead.⁸³

Eleanor tried to arrange for Brigid's transportation to Dar es Salaam many times but her parents, skeptical of Eleanor's new life, would not let Brigid travel to an African state. The South African government was monitoring the phone at Brigid's boarding school and was censoring the letters they wrote to each other. This devastated Eleanor to the point that Ronnie Karils—between stories of military training exercises and drinking with his comrades—used his memoir to emphasize how much the separation upset her. Eleanor Kasrils did not see her daughter from 1963 until 1973, when her mother accompanied Brigid on a trip to London—a reunion that Kasrils described as “upsetting.”⁸⁴

The difference in their attitudes toward family can be attributed to the point at which their families began. By the time First's oldest daughter Shawn was born in 1950, she had been out of school and wholly devoted to politics for four years. It is important to note that before 1950, the CPSA was legal in South Africa, so there was no threat of arrest and no need to live underground. When that changed with the Suppression of Communism Act, Ruth First was not willing to surrender her career as a journalist—or give up her involvement in the struggle—in order to fit the role of the doting mother.

⁸² Eleanor Kasrils interview.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Eleanor Kasrils's daughter Brigid was born in 1956, but at that time Kasrils was not involved with the anti-apartheid movement. When she decided to get involved with the movement in 1960, the SACP was already underground and Ronnie was already heavily involved with MK. Because she had known life with a child before the movement, though, her separation from Brigid affected her harshly; something that Ruth First did not experience in the same way. During her exile in Tanzania and in London, Kasrils continued working for the ANC. It seems that the guilt instilled a motivation in her to make her work justify her deteriorating relationship with her daughter, caused by her absence.

Perceptions of Communism

In the early 1870s and 1880s, the first wave of Eastern European Jews fleeing pogroms arrived in South Africa. By the time Julius and Tilly First arrived in the early 1900s, roughly twelve percent of Johannesburg's white community was made up of ethnic Jews.⁸⁵ These new immigrants were working class and a large number of them were members of the Labour Party until a major ideological split formed within the party during World War I. When that happened, a South African branch of the International Socialist League (ISL) formed. From that, a Yiddish-speaking sect emerged which organized itself based on the Jewish section of the Russian Bolshevik Party. When Tsar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate in 1917 many Jewish immigrants, sharing the collective memory of the pogroms, celebrated and identified with the

⁸⁵ Mark Israel and Simon Adams, "'That Spells Trouble': Jews and the Communist Party of South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 149.

Bolsheviks. ISL delegates from all parts of South Africa met in 1921 and formally established the CPSA.⁸⁶

Julius and Tilly First's families were Jewish immigrants from the Baltic States who fit into this narrative perfectly. By the time Julius and Tilly married in 1924, they were both active in politics and Julius was the chairman of the CPSA. Ruth First's beliefs regarding communism can be traced back to her parents' political involvement. During Ruth's childhood, the Firsts discussed their political ideas with their children. When it came to the Firsts' friends, Tilly recalls that they only associated with people who were interested in politics saying: "We didn't have ordinary friends and I didn't ever want anybody who didn't understand what we were talking about...we had few friends, but we had Party friends."⁸⁷

Growing up, Ruth First was inclined to debate and she wanted to know why people believed the things they did. She enjoyed asking people their opinions and following up with: "Did you hear that or is that your opinion?"⁸⁸ First had no reservations when it came directing these types of questions toward her parents and she became skeptical of their blind allegiance to Soviet-style communism, of which she was critical.⁸⁹ This became a source of tension between First and her parents, and especially between First and Tilly. One has to assume that this tension only grew deeper during First's college years when she was becoming more politically active, although still living with her parents. However, for all of their disagreements, the Firsts were always proud of their daughter, her beliefs, and her role in the movement.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Tilly First and Hilary Kuny interview.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ronald First interview.

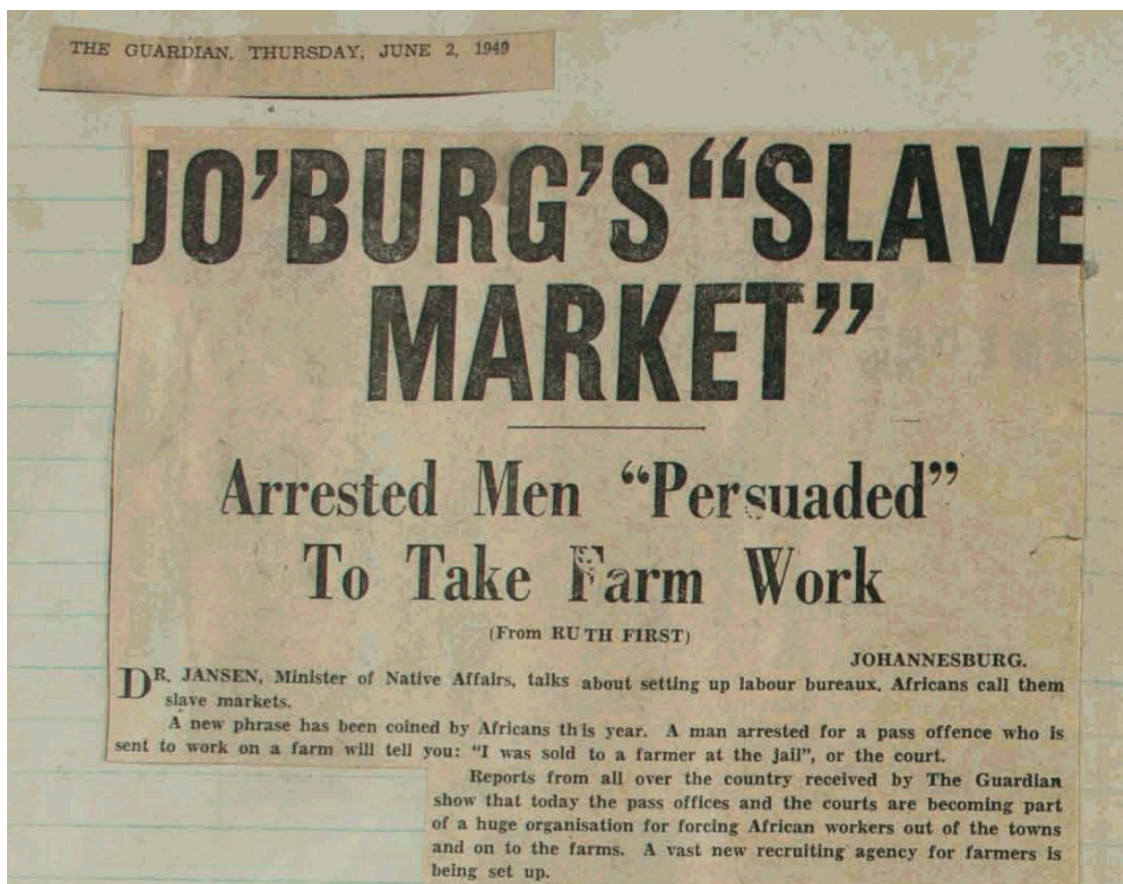
⁹⁰ Joe Slovo interview.

As mentioned previously, First's role as a journalist was her main role in the early days. Scholars like Don Pinnock and Gavin Williams have characterized her work as interrogative.^{91 92} Her contributions to *The Guardian* included campaigns that exposed the mistreatment of black laborers in South Africa and used capitalism as the primary explanation for their plight, however, it should be noted that First does not ever deny or discount the existence of racism. Instead, her journalism implies that the capitalist system allowed for South Africa to stratify itself into a racist society made up of a white bourgeoisie and a black proletariat. The racism in apartheid South Africa allowed for the capitalist system to perpetuate ruthlessly, creating a vicious cycle of exploitation and racially motivated crimes. Picture 6 shows the headline and preface for a June 2, 1949 article in *The Guardian* in which First reports that Africans violating Pass Laws were being given the opportunity to take farm work or pay a fine. Because many of them had no money, they would be forced to work for at least six months.

⁹¹ Don Pinnock, "Building an alternative consensus for political action: Ruth First as Journalist and Activist," *Review of African Political Economy* 41 no. 139 (2014): 99.

⁹² Gavin Williams, "Ruth First: The Analysis and Practice of Politics in South Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 41 no. 139, 20.

Picture 6: Article written by Ruth First for *The Guardian*, 1949.



The Ruth First Papers

Unlike Ruth First, Eleanor Kasrils was the child of non-Jews who were not politically active, although they were politically aware. Eleanor remembers them being cognizant of the political goings on of the time, but they weren't formally affiliated with any organized political party. She does recall, however, being extremely scared when the Nationalists came to power in 1948 because her parents were communist sympathizers who had a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* in their home.⁹³ Where Ruth's parents were supportive of their daughter's political exploits, Kasrils's parents were harshly critical of her involvement in the struggle. In the early 1960s, her mother owned a bookshop in Durban called Logan University Books. The shop was

⁹³ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

largely financed through a government contract and Kasrils's mother worried that her daughter's involvement in the struggle would cause her to lose the contract.⁹⁴ Additionally, during the times when Kasrils was away, her parents took care of Brigid. As previously mentioned, during Eleanor's exile in Dar es Salaam, she made continuous efforts for Brigid to join her, only for her parents to refuse to send her and restrict their communication. Later on, Kasrils found out that her parents had been secretly trying to adopt Brigid all along.⁹⁵

When Eleanor met Ronnie, she was still identifying with the Liberal Party. She and Ronnie debated politics frequently and while she admired his passion, she thought that the way he talked about communism was extremely propagandistic.⁹⁶ After speaking with other members of the SACP, though, Kasrils was compelled to leave the Liberal Party for two reasons. First, the Liberal Party called for qualified—not universal—enfranchisement. Kasrils says she changed her mind about a qualified franchise after her first meeting with the SACOD.⁹⁷ Second, the Liberal Party talked of equal rights for Africans, but there was no talk of an armed struggle should it become necessary. For Kasrils, that meant that the Liberal Party was “all talk and no action.”⁹⁸

The difference in these two women's approaches to communism lies in how she learned about the ideology. In the case of Ruth First, an acceptance of Soviet-style communism was instilled in her by her parents. However, as she got older, she began to question the legitimacy of the system which everyone seemed to follow blindly, without criticism. First's naturally inquisitive nature primed her for a career as a journalist, the entirety of which she spent applying capitalism as one of the primary causes for the mistreatment of African workers. In her later

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ronnie Kasrils, *The Unlikely Secret Agent*, 42.

⁹⁷ Eleanor Kasrils interview.

⁹⁸ Ronnie Kasrils, *The Unlikely Secret Agent*, 42.

years as an academic, she used the work of other academics to further justify this application. In *Barrel of a Gun*, First uses Andre Gunder Frank's dependency theory to explain an emerging form of imperialism.⁹⁹

First was very confident in her view of communism as well as her critical view of the Soviet Union and she often took on fellow Party members, including Ronnie Kasrils and Nelson Mandela.¹⁰⁰

By contrast, Eleanor Kasrils's interpretation of communism largely came late in her life from Ronnie. She did not come from a family that encouraged political activeness so she had not spent her entire adolescence questioning the beliefs of those around her. She lacked the analytical ability that was second-nature to First.

Another factor that plays into each woman's level of involvement within the communist party has to do with the point in time at which her involvement began. In the case of Ruth First, her involvement with the anti-apartheid movement began before she left the University of the Witwatersrand in 1946 and she was a member of the SACP from the very beginning. First had the opportunity to be involved with the movement in its infancy, when it was still in need of communicators to garner support, be it through speaking at a rally or writing for a newspaper.

By the time Kasrils got involved with the SACP in 1960, it had grown remarkably. Also by that time the Party, its newspapers, and many of its leaders had been banned and most of the work was happening underground. There was little opportunity for a new Party member to be involved with the movement unless she joined MK.

Academics and Agitators

⁹⁹ First, *Barrel of a Gun*, 453.

¹⁰⁰ Nelson Mandela, *Conversations With Myself* (New York, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010) 54-55.

Ruth First and Eleanor Kasrils shared an incredible number of similarities. Both women were born to upper-middle class white families in pre-apartheid South Africa. They both joined the SACP, the SACOD, and the ANC. The two women had husbands who were deeply involved in each other's lives. Most importantly, the two shared the hope for a South Africa that belonged to all who lived there. The two women acted on this hope in different ways, with Ruth First becoming an academic and Eleanor Kasrils ultimately becoming one of South Africa's most feared female agitators.

The difference in each woman's role in the movement can be attributed to their perceptions of their own femininity and identity as a mother as an obstacle in the way of success and acceptance in a male dominated sphere, or—in Eleanor Kasrils's case—something that was not an issue, rather just a part of who she was that did not need to be judged or validated by another person.

Each woman's knowledge of communism and her source of that knowledge also affected her role in the movement. Ruth First's early life was influenced greatly by her parents' political involvement. She was interested in the political beliefs of her parents' friends and was not hesitant to ask them to justify those beliefs, the result of these conversations being her criticism of the Soviet-style communism with which many members of the SACP identified. Her curiosity and inquisitiveness led to an era of writing radical pieces of journalism at which she excelled. Finally, she began her career in academia where she was free to research and write about how capitalism and racism worked together to suppress African workers.

Eleanor Kasrils did not come to communism until she was 24 years old and became involved with a member of the Party who was a high ranking member of its militaristic faction.

Because she came to communism so late in her life, she was not able to develop a critique the way that Ruth First, Joe Slovo, and other, older party members had.

All of this is not to say that one form of activism is right and the other is wrong. The idea of this paper is that two remarkable women—one a brilliant intellectual, the other a mentally tough combatant—were both important figures in the anti-apartheid movement. Ruth First’s underground journalism was as courageous as Eleanor Kasrils’s bombing of the Durban General Post Office.

It should be said protest without the destruction of property is ideal but it is not practical in all cases, one of which is apartheid South Africa; where would the country be without the efforts of Ronnie and Eleanor Kasrils and their fellow members of Umkhonto weSizwe? A favorite quote among MK cadres was one said not by Lenin or Mao, but by former United States President John F. Kennedy who said: “Those who make nonviolent revolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable.”¹⁰¹ After years of watching the effort, banning, and exile of people like Ruth First, this inevitable revolution manifested itself in the form of Eleanor Kasrils and Umkhonto weSizwe.

¹⁰¹ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 43.

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