

Book Review: Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid

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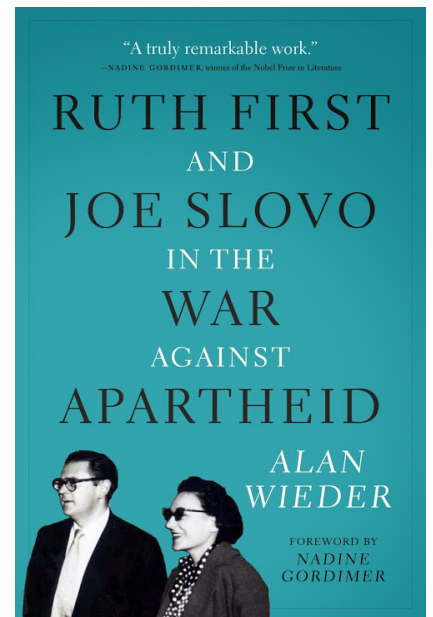
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*This biography of Ruth First and Joe Slovo – the husband and wife team who were leaders of the war to end apartheid in South Africa – intertwines documentary record with personal interviews to portray the complexities of this extraordinary couple and their efforts to navigate a time of great tension. **Emma Lundin** finds that **Alan Wieder**'s work deserves to be well-read for its insight into the couple's impact on political developments in South Africa and beyond during the 20th century and their relevance for understanding contemporary events in Southern Africa.*



Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid. Alan Wieder. Monthly Review Press. September 2013

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It was a stormy relationship that only a bomb planted by an apartheid agent could blow up. Ruth First was a great researcher and thorn-in-the-side of the apartheid government before her assassination by letter bomb in 1982; Joe Slovo was the lawyer turned guerilla mastermind, who blew up power stations and military headquarters before becoming a minister in Mandela's first government, and laid to rest in Soweto's Avalon Cemetery. Together, they were two of the most famous and important of South Africa's anti-apartheid activists, and lived the sort of lives that made for great stories and even greater myths. Now, as the 20th anniversary of the first democratic elections in South Africa draws nearer, their lives' worth and sacrifices are at risk of being relegated to the dusty shelf of history.

That is exactly what Alan Wieder – a professor emeritus at the University of South Carolina, with previous appointments at the University of the Western Cape and Stellenbosch University in South Africa – has set out to prevent by publishing this, his most recent book on South Africa's apartheid history. He is on a quest to stem the tide of forgetfulness that means that “few young South Africans know of the contributions or the sensibilities that Ruth and Joe represented regarding the social justice and the revolution against class disparity and racism in the world” (p. 353).

Wieder knows his subjects well and cares deeply about them. Their stories have been written before: Ruth First's prison memoir – the short *117 Days* – and Joe's posthumous *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* form part of Wieder's sources, but he also makes use of his skills and contacts as an oral historian to gain better insight into the

First-Slovo dynamics, and their relationships with each other and others. As a result, his book comes stamped with the approval of many of their contemporaries, and contains interviews with several anti-apartheid activists who all help to bring a clearer picture of the protagonists to the fore.

As the first chapters make clear, Joe and Ruth were very different. She was the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Latvia, a well-educated middle class journalist who grew up in a communist household and was not afraid of the risk involved in telling the stories of those most oppressed and impoverished by apartheid. He was an immigrant, a poor Jewish boy from Lithuania, who served in the Second World War before becoming a streetwise lawyer representing – among others – Nelson Mandela. They met at Wits University in Johannesburg and were fused together by passionate politics, channelled through the African National Congress (ANC) and its close ally, the South African Communist Party (SACP) – both banned and forced underground by the apartheid regime.



Their differences shaped their relationship: Joe was a seemingly loyal communist and a senior-ranking SACP member, while Ruth's academic mind saw her move much closer to the New Left than the SACP was comfortable with. Chapter three contains detailed accounts of their arguments – often public – about Stalinism and the invasion of Hungary in 1956, which gives a clear insight into a household divided along ideological lines. Wieder does not shy away from the controversies of his subjects – among them SACP's close ties to the USSR, and its resolve to use violence in the quest to liberate South Africa from minority rule. Personal flaws are also laid bare: Ruth in particular comes across as a ruthless reviewer of other people's ideas and intellects, while Joe's complicated relationship with his daughters is a red thread throughout the chapters. In fact, Wieder's oral history method works particularly well when it adds to the information the reader might have picked up from the autobiographical works mentioned above, including the hardships and heartbreaks of life in exile, and Ruth's great reluctance to leave South Africa even after it became obviously dangerous for her to stay, as outlined in chapter six.

But one comes away with a wish that Wieder had spent more time deciphering the gender ideas of the generation born, like Slovo and First, in the 1920s. Yes, they were of a generation for which even women working full-time for a revolution needed to bear the lion share of the housework, but the attributes given to Ruth and Joe by many of Wieder's interviewees often seem very gendered, amplifying the former's feminine vulnerability and the latter's masculine certainty and strength. Ruth does seem to have undergone a feminist awakening during what would prove

to be the last decade of her life: in chapter eight – “Academics and Revolution: Taking the Struggle Home” – Wieder details how Ruth “blossomed” after moving to Mozambique from London in the late 1970s to take up a position as Director of Research at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane’s Centre of African Studies in Maputo, where she began to leave her hair natural and abandoned the need to stay fashionable. It seems something of a missed opportunity not to explore the impact of this awakening and transformation on her political ideas further.

If given another few hundred pages to tell the story, the author might very well have addressed these issues (a similar title by another author, Elinor Sisulu’s *Walter & Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime*, is a couple of hundred pages longer and still filled to the brim). Wieder might then also have been able to devote more space and time to charting Ruth First and Joe Slovo’s separate political deeds, thoughts and developments in a clearer way, with more time dedicated to their differences, which would help those readers who are not yet familiar with their lives and work. Regardless of that, however, this is an interesting book that deserves to be well-read for its insight into the impact of Ruth First and Joe Slovo on political developments in South Africa and beyond during the last half of the 20th century, and their relevance for understanding contemporary events in Southern Africa.

Emma Lundin is a PhD candidate in the history department at Birkbeck, University of London. Her doctoral thesis, which is funded by the AHRC, investigates links between women in the Swedish Social Democratic Party and women in the ANC from the early 1960s until 1994. Her research interests range from the historical impact of transnational relationships to ideas about southern Africa and Scandinavia, gender and equality, and the histories of international socialism, cooperation and activism. Emma tweets at [@emmaelinor](#). [Read more reviews by Emma](#).