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Moving tribute to revered uncle, st

TIMMOL QUEST FOR JUSTICE

Imtiaz Cajee
STE Publishers
REVIEW: GERALD SHAW

AHMED TIMMOL died in the hands of the security police in October, 1971, the 22nd activist to die in detention during the apartheid era.

An unconvincing inquest verdict held that he had committed suicide, jumping to his death from the 10th floor of John Vorster Square.

The author of this book, who writes a moving tribute to a revered uncle, believes that Timmol died under

torture and was then thrown out of the 10th floor window.

In his preface, President Thabo Mbeki endorses Imtiaz Cajee's characterisation of Timmol as "one of the most celebrated official murder victims of apartheid South Africa".

Timmol's death at the age of 29 was not the first of its kind under NP rule between 1964 and 1990. There were usually thought to be three possible explanations in such cases: that the victim was murdered by being thrown out of a high window, that the victim was driven to jump by intolerable torture, or the victim just committed suicide.

Cajee has added a fourth category,

arguing that Timmol was already dead when he was thrown out of the window.

As none of the security policemen involved in Timmol's interrogation applied for amnesty, or were required to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, no further light has been thrown on Timmol's death from that quarter.

Timmol, a devout Muslim who was also a convinced communist, is honoured as a hero of the freedom struggle. At the time of his arrest he was setting up underground structures of the ANC and the SACP to write and distribute anti-apartheid pamphlets and propaganda.

Rugle hero and murder victim

Cajee has conducted his own investigation and collected a body of circumstantial evidence to support his conclusion, which is underpinned by the testimony of a number of others who were detained at the same time and have given detailed accounts of their own torture.

The undertaker who fetched Timol's body from the police mortuary told Cajee that fingernails were missing and there were bruises and burn marks on his body. Pathologists told the inquest that the bruises had been caused some time before death.

There are horrifying passages in this book in which detainees describe in graphic terms the classic KGB and

Gestapo-style methods employed by the security police.

Also in 1971, the Imam Haron of Claremont died in mysterious circumstances while in detention.

As the Cape Times argued in a series of angry leading articles at the time, the 24 bruises on his body reported by a pathologist could hardly have been caused by falling down stairs, as the security police had claimed.

After Haron and Timol, another 50 anti-apartheid activists were to die in detention before 1990, including Steve Biko, whose death caused an international outcry.

Timol, a gifted and much-loved

teacher, was a member of a close-knit community of descendants of immigrants from Kholivad, a village in Gujarat, India. The founders of the community arrived in the Transvaal in 1883 and established a tradition of self-help and community service.

This small community produced some notable political leaders, including Dr Yusuf Dadoo and, in the younger generation, the Pahad brothers, Essop and Aziz. Had Timol lived, he might well have been one of their number.

While too detailed and hagiographical to be effortlessly readable, this book is an important document in social history.