

Carroll
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**Splendour and death of Ahmed Timol:
Detention, interrogation and torture of an anti-apartheid activist
1941-1971
A book review
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The preliminaries of the torture of Ahmed Timol began in a well recognized, almost universal pattern: arrest late at night or early hours of the morning when there is no one around and people are most vulnerable; the police follow procedures and plant incriminating evidence; the policemen are well armed, burly and intimidating. Handcuffed, Ahmed Timol with his friend Salim Essop is taken by car to the police station. The building is frightening; the turn stiles, the clanking of steel doors, ominous. Suddenly for no reason and with no words, before asking any questions blows to the stomach and slaps in the face. Then solitary confinement, terrifying by itself, brings in the gravity of the matter.

The interrogation in earnest begins, and with it the systematic torture. There are local and country similarities of special methods, in this case, like anywhere else in the world, described by victims who survived to tell their stories. The electrical shocks (up to 240 volts) applied to sensitive part of the body and the hanging upside down from a staircase or window are described by former detainees in this and other South Africans Security Police stations. With rare insightfulness the effects on the body and mind of those techniques are reported in this book by Salim Essop who survived the ordeal. How the electrical shocks cause the loss of control of the body and the confusion and paralysis of the mind; the terror of being suspended by the feet by two torturers alternating in some kind of grotesque game of grabbing one foot while letting go of the other. Other methods included are putting a cloth bag over the head, tied to the neck to cause asphyxia, and more popular methods of punching, kicking, threatening, humiliating, demeaning and exhausting the prisoners. All these forms of torture were with all probabilities applied to Ahmed Timol. There is evidence from observations made by family and friends of his body after death and by the post-mortem pathologist report available that indeed he suffered multiple blows to all part of his body, abrasion, punctures, lacerations, cigarette burns and pulling of the nails.

The precise cause of death as required in any death certificate is not given in the report signed on May 1972 by Dr. Jonathan Gluckman, who on behalf of the family witnessed the post-mortem examination conducted by the government pathologist, Dr. Nicholas Jacobus Scheepers. This is most unusual, but explainable by the circumstances. A private doctor would take serious risks if he had insisted in putting down the true cause of death. But he did not have to. He knew that with the findings he put down in the report no other conclusion, but death after severe torture, could be reached. He describes multiple skin abrasions, bruises, and subcutaneous haemorrhages over the right clavicle, right upper arm, right elbow, right forearm, right iliac bone, right thigh and left side of the neck below the ear. He observes that the lesions are in the process of healing and estimates

their age between 4 and 7 days, precisely the period of time between his arrest and his death. Dr. Klugman gave us the facts and he knew that any other physician would reach the right conclusions. The book refers to the examination but does not reproduce the official report by Dr. Scheepers. Let us hope that it will appear in the new edition.

Where did the South African Security Police learn these methods? I asked Dr. Leo Eitinger, a survivor of Auschwitz, how the Nazis could control thousands, hundred of thousands of people with so few Gestapo agents, where did they learn it? He replied, "Ah, the Nazis were very creative". The same question was asked in the 1970s during the epidemic of torture under the military dictatorships in Latin America. Of course, no one has to teach any perverted policeman and interrogator how to punch, kick and torture. However, because it is widely assumed that torture is a refinement in the art of interrogation and no one wants to be left behind in a game in which there so much at stake, any hint or help is welcome. The fact is that torture, apart from being morally wrong, is a lousy approach to interrogation. Intelligent questioning and among others the simple psychological trick of the "good and bad policeman", based on the human need of love and reassurance in times of deprivation and danger, are far more effective. Even so, it is easily countered if the victim is forewarned and prepared. There are plenty of examples in the history of torture to prove this point. Some torturers consider themselves professionals, "technicians without ideology" in the art of interrogation. Based on this belief "consultants" may cross international borders, and techniques and training programs have been taught by the security and intelligence forces of some countries. During the epidemic of torture in the 1970s and 80s there was evidence that USA operatives had contacts with Latin America military and gave training mostly to Brazilian, Argentinean and El Salvadoran military and security forces. In this respect, the Guantanamo, Afghanistan and Abu Ghraib stories are simply an extension of programs from Latin America to the Middle East.

Imtiaz Cajee's book mentions that, since at that time existed close diplomatic and cooperative relationships between Israel and South Africa in trade and weapons production (including atomic weapons), it is probable that the exchange may have included interrogation methods, on which the Israeli security establishment have plenty of experience. Their expertise in torture is beyond question. It is documented in Amnesty International's annual reports since 1973 and in other NGOs preoccupied with human rights that the Israeli practice torture on Palestinian political prisoners systematically and routinely. Sadly, Israel is not alone in this gruesome business as every year Amnesty International reports that state torture is practiced in over eighty countries.

In training for torture the main processes are psychological. In the first place the normal inhibitions which every human has to attack or harm other member of our society have to be removed. All societies and main religions teach the values of love and peace, and normal childhood experiences predispose to seek the enjoyment involved in the relationship of respect and mutuality with family, friends and even strangers. In other words, the torturer has to learn to torture without guilt. It is surprisingly simple. Remember the experiments of Stanley Milgram described in his book *Obedience to Authority*. (The majority of decent average citizens would inflict to other human beings

pain and suffering to the point of putting their lives in danger, just because they were instructed to do so under the authority of Science.)

The security agents who detained Ahmed Timol and took him to their police headquarters in John Foster Square in Johannesburg on the night of the 22 October of 1971 were persuaded that the authority of the State, under the protection of the Suppression of Communism Act, the Terrorism Act of 1966 and the Internal Security Act of 1973, took responsibility for their actions. Ahmed and his friend Salim Essop after their arrest were separated at the headquarters never to see other again. The two of them like many others very probably suffered the same treatment, but Salim survived to tell the story. Like them Ahmed became an enemy of the State, a communist, a threat to internal security, a terrorist, and a demonic person. In their eyes he was not entitled to respect, pity or any other human consideration. He was not one like themselves, with a particular individuality and name. Although Mr. Ahmed Timol was a respected school teacher, in the police reports he is referred to repeatedly as "the indian". Like in every thing else under the apartheid government, racism was prevalent as a pattern and form of separation of "ourselves" from "the other"; the insider, white, morally clean from the outsider, not white and morally unclean. Thus the victim became dehumanized, an object not entitled to humane treatment. No doubt that in his torture racism played a significant role. When Steve Biko was tortured and fell into a coma as a result of a brain injury the police surgeon who examined him belief that it was some kind of a trick, because "this people do those things". Similarly when the "indian" Salim Essop was examined at the Johannesburg General Hospital on October 26, four days after his arrest the medical staff informed that he "had been severely assaulted and suffered from clinical hysteria", both a misdiagnosis and a term of stigma. In apartheid South Africa, like in other countries in the past and present trying to subjugate a native population, racism and the bureaucratic administration of discriminatory laws and torture became tools of a colonial system.

The aim of torture is primarily to eliminate the personality or will to resist of the victim. Collecting information may be a goal or not. Coercion of an individual or a social group is the basic purpose. For this, fundamental functions or the conscious nucleus of the self have to be destroyed. Many factors mediate the resistance to torture, among them group support, a cohesive ideology with beliefs and values, and the preparation for the experience of torture. Ideologically Ahmed was well prepared in Moscow, London and South Africa. He was supported by his friends in the underground and by his beliefs as a Muslim. (He saw no contradiction between Islam and communism, the same way in which many Christians see no contradiction between Christianity and marxism.) The chances are that he resisted well and this enraged to extremes his torturers with the consequence that having nearly killed him and with many marks of incriminating evidence they threw him out of the window. This is also the conclusion of the Hon. Essop Pahad, a close family friend and fellow in the under ground, now Minister in the Presidency, Republic of South Africa.

To add to the historical, contextual and scientific evidence an appendix to the main text of the book lists the causes of death in detainees of the South African police from 1967 to 1990. Results: 32 prisoners died by "suicide", mostly by hanging, of which 4 died by

falling out of a window. It is highly unlikely that a complication of detention so frequent and foreseeable could not be prevented by simple devices and security practices.

As an aftermath the death of Ahmed Timol was mourned and protested nationally and internationally by the churches, governments, Amnesty International and in Great Britain by Ahmed's union which advocated the academic boycott of South African institutions. Other international bodies followed advocating and instituting boycotts and economic divestment. The World Medical Association suspended the membership of the South African Medical Association and the rugby British national team refused to play in South Africa. This was part of the solidarity movement and successful fight against apartheid South Africa. There lessons here to be applied to other roguish estates which at present practice discrimination and torture.

When in the late 19770s a group of Sandinista prisoners under dictator Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua were told that one of their leaders had been killed and was dead, they replied, "Oh no, he is not dead, he is one of those men who never die". Ahmed Timol was not victim of torture; he was a victor in the struggle against the criminal and inhuman violence of his government. Ahmed Timol did not die; he lives in our memory and our hearts. This book celebrates his life and his sacrifice, lest we forget.

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