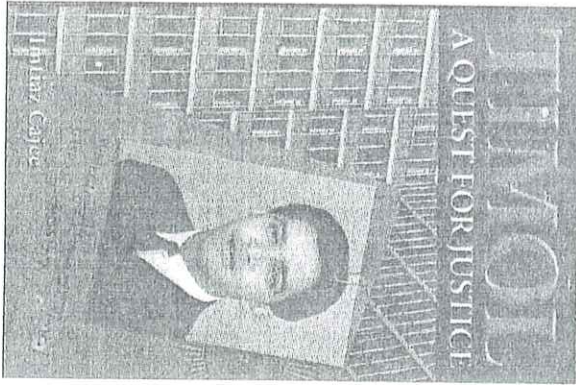


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Timol: A Quest for Justice by Imtiaz Cajee (SITE Publishers, R135) REVIEWED BY GWEN FODDBREY

The euphoria which accompanied South Africa's transition to democracy, and the subsequent sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, ended many chapters in this country's turbulent past.

But not for all. Some families - like that of 29-year-old Ahmed Timol, who plunged 10 floors from Johannesburg's notorious John Vorster police station in October 1971 - have never found closure.

This book, written by Timol's nephew, re-examines the circumstances surrounding the incident and pays homage to one of the most impassioned activists to fall victim to the South African Security Branch.

Timol was the product of a conservative and political upbringing in a staunchly Muslim Indian family. One

Book on Timol brings no closure to his death

art, books, dance, film, theatre

of six children born to Haji and Hawa Timol, he was raised in Breyten and Rooodepoort and showed signs of extraordinary academic talent at a young age.

He was first politicised in a study circle where banned books were often read and discussed.

After qualifying as a teacher, he was given a post at the Rooodepoort Indian School, where his pupils and colleagues quickly sensed the intellectual gifts which distinguished him and his natural flair for instruction. It was during this period that Timol began distributing political pamphlets and literature, to the distress of those in the Indian community who feared retribution. (In many ways, the same anxiety was echoed in the mainstream Jewish community towards its own anti-apartheid protesters.)

Timol's long-standing friendship with brothers Essop and Aziz Pahad, as well as exposure to the writings of Es'kia Mphahlele and Father Trevor Huddleston, among others, further emboldened his activism.

Then, in 1967/8, he embarked on a prolonged visit to London, followed by nine months of political training in the Soviet Union with a young Thabo Mbeki.

While Cajee provides very little information about the form this training took, it is clear that the communist ide-

ology made a profound and lasting impression on Timol. Once back in South Africa, he developed a systematic plan of action, under the guidance of the London-based SA Communist Party.

Besides distributing pamphlets and helping establish an underground newspaper, his activities involved setting up leaflet and letter bombs.

By August 1971, it had become obvious that he was being watched by the security police. Nevertheless, he refused to go into hiding. When he and fellow activist Salim Essop were finally arrested, their interrogators were already proficient in the techniques of torture.

Essop - who survived the ordeal - was viciously beaten up, deprived of sleep, nearly asphyxiated, made to stand for long periods and given electric shocks.

On Saturday, October 23 1971 - after four or five days of repeated torture - Timol was taken to the 10th floor of the building, where his interrogation continued.

According to police statements, the questioning proved unusually productive on this day, possibly because Timol was nearing breaking point. However, what happened next was later described in conflicting ways by those present.

According to some police statements, Timol asked to use the toilet, rose from his chair, opened the window

and "dove through it". Other statements give different accounts of the event.

According to Dr Jonathan Gluckman, who attended the post-mortem, the body showed signs of multiple unexplained injuries which had been sustained before falling.

George Bizos, in his book "No-one to Blame", devoted a chilling chapter ("Indians Can't Fly") to the case. During the inquest, in which he and Issy Maisels represented the Timol family, Maisels pointed out to Sergeant Joao Anastasio Rodrigues of security police headquarters that - given the height of Timol relative to the window - he could not have dived through it, as Rodrigues insisted, but would have had to wriggle, and could therefore have been stopped.

A number of other inconsistencies were eloquently argued by Maisels, but to no avail. The official finding was death by suicide.

In 1996, an aged and widowed Hawa Timol testified about her son's death at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Sadly, this traumatic experience gave her no further insights into what really happened, since none of his interrogators ever applied to the commission for amnesty, nor was anyone ever subpoenaed to provide information about it. She died the following year.

Repeated attempts by Imtiaz Cajee to

approach Captain Johannes Hendrik Gloy - who was also present at the interrogation - have been rebuffed or ignored.

Today, 34 years on, there has still been no admission of murder, no clarification of what took place, and no peace for the Timols. In failing to provide this, writes Cajee, "the TRC, for our family, [was] an enormous disappointment".

Cajee's writing is repetitive, poorly edited and crudely hagiographical. Moreover, his anguish - while deeply moving - is unlikely to be relieved, since it is hard to imagine anything further being done to resolve the case. The murderers of Ahmed Timol - like those of countless other apartheid victims - remain at large, clearly untroubled by any pang of conscience.

In remaining open, Timol's case is - tragically - closed.

Some snide asides from the author, including the (completely unsubstantiated) speculation that the SA Police "obtained assistance from the Israelis in their methods of torture and surveillance", are not only jarring and offensive, but do little to strengthen his cause.

Nevertheless, as a tribute to a courageous activist who lived - and died - for his principles, the book is a poignant and compelling reminder of the blood which still stains the hands of many South Africans.