

John Vorster Square

symbol of terror



Sunday Times, 25 April 1968

John Vorster Square (1968 – 1997)

In 1961, John Vorster was appointed Minister of Justice by Prime Minister Verwoerd. He later became the prime minister and then state president of South Africa. He was responsible for granting the police harsh new powers against those who opposed apartheid. He also increased restrictions on the media and made it far more difficult for them to report openly on the torture and general abuse of human rights visited under security legislation. The police station named after the Minister, John Vorster Square (JVS), was opened in 1968. The dreaded Security Branch was housed on the 9th and 10th floors. Ahmed Timol was the first person to die while in detention in John Vorster, although others had already died elsewhere and more deaths were to follow.

In 1997, the police station was renamed Johannesburg Central Police Station.

There is space here only for the stories of three men...



John Vorster Square during construction, 1968
MuseuMAfrica,

The Skewed Nature of Evidence under Apartheid

In this lesson plan, learners will be given the opportunity to examine some of the evidence provided during inquests into the deaths of detainees. They will be asked to interrogate the validity of the evidence and to identify gaps and contradictions.



Ahmed Timol with his mother University of the Witwatersrand

Ahmed Timol was supposed to have committed suicide by jumping out of a window in John Vorster Square. But did he?

Ahmed Timol was born in 1941 in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga). His father was close to Yusuf Dadoo and other founders of the Indian Congress. Ahmed became a teacher. At the end of the 1960s, he was sent on a training trip to the Lenin School in Moscow accompanied by Thabo Mbeki. Ahmed was instructed to go back to South Africa to find recruits for the Communist Party. In 1971, he was arrested with a comrade in Coronationville, Johannesburg in possession of pamphlets and banned literature. He died in JVS. His family never accepted the story that he committed suicide while in detention and his mother went to the TRC in 1997 to appeal for help in identifying his murderers. Nobody came forward. According to people detained after Timol, the security police taunted them by saying that they would also find themselves 'committing suicide' (or being pushed out of the window like Timol).



Ahmed Timol lying in coffin during his funeral proceedings, 1971 University of the Witwatersrand

Photographs of Ahmed Timol used with kind permission of Imtiaz Cajee



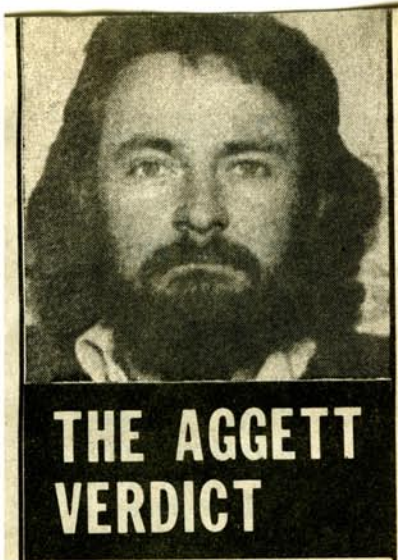
Rand Daily Mail, 16 February 1977

Matthews Mabelane was supposed to have fallen out of a 10th floor window of John Vorster Square in an escape attempt. But did he?

Matthews Mabelane was born in 1955 and was arrested in 1977 in Meadowlands, Soweto. The security police alleged that he was on his way to Botswana for military training. He was taken to JVS. A couple of weeks later, it was alleged that he had tried to escape by climbing out on to a window ledge but had fallen to his death. His death was ruled accidental.

In Detention
by Chris van Wyk

He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself while washing
He fell from the ninth floor
He hung from the ninth floor
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping
He hung from the ninth floor
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping
He hung from a piece of soap while washing



Rand Daily Mail, 23 December 1982

Neil Aggett was supposed to have committed suicide by hanging himself in his cell in John Vorster Square. But did he?

Neil Aggett was born in 1953 and had studied medicine. However, by 1978, he was involved in the African Food and Canning Workers Union and the establishment of the South African Allied Workers Union. Aggett was detained in a crack-down on anti-apartheid resistance at the end of 1981 and was taken to JVS. In early 1982, the security police claimed that Aggett's body had been found in his cell after he had hanged himself. Advocate Bizos pretended to go along with the suicide verdict so that he could bring a lot of information to the inquest showing that the security police's methods were so cruel that they could drive a person to commit suicide.



The construction of John Vorster Square police station Sunday Times, 15 January 1968



Photo of the cell in which Helen Passtoors was held at John Vorster in 1985. The photo was used in her trial in 1985 University of Witwatersrand.

No one is to blame

MAGISTRATE

23 JUN 1972 By CAROL STEYN

THE PRESIDING magistrate at the Timol inquest, Mr. J. J. L. de Villiers, found yesterday that nobody was to blame for the death of Mr. Ahmed Essop Timol.

He committed suicide, he found.

The probable motive was Mr. Timol's political ideals and the chain of events since his arrest on Friday night, October 22, 1971, with incriminating documents in his possession, until his reaction of shock and dismay when he heard that "Quentin, Martin and Henry" had been identified.

"At this stage of his life the opportunity was there and he used it."

Mr. De Villiers said he wanted to recommend that in future detainees under the Terrorism Act be examined by a district surgeon as soon as possible after their arrest. The doctor would then be able to find what the state of health of the detainee was and whether there were any signs of assault.

This would rule out long

inquiries like this one and might save the police unnecessary embarrassment.

Yesterday was the 16th day of the inquest in the Johannesburg Regional Court on Mr. Timol, a 30-year-old Roodepoort schoolteacher who fell to his death from the 10th floor of John Vorster Square on October 27, last year.

Mr. De Villiers said that he had to establish if Mr. Timol had been murdered, if he had accidentally fallen out of the window, or if he had committed suicide.

"To think of murder is ridiculous. He was a valuable find for the Security Police."

"To come to any other finding but that Mr. Timol had jumped through the window, is also ridiculous."

He therefore had to find that Mr. Timol had committed suicide, Mr. De Villiers said.

The probable motive had to be established, however. This could be one of four things:

- He had been tortured by the Security Police.
- He had blamed himself for information given to the Security Police.
- He had feared a long imprisonment.
- A political motive conforming to the communist ideology.

Mr. De Villiers said he had no reason to doubt the evidence of police witnesses that they had not assaulted Mr. Timol and that he had not been assaulted by anybody in their presence.

"Although he was questioned for long hours, he was treated in a civilised and humane manner."

According to the evidence

ings yesterday morning, Mr. P. Hare (for the Timol family) asked the magistrate to consider postponing the finding to enable cross-examination of Major-General C. A. Buys to be completed.

General Buys collapsed in the witness box while being cross-examined by Mr. I. A. Maisels on May 4.

Mr. S. A. Cilliers (for the police) said that according to General Buys's medical adviser, his health was such that he should not submit himself to any strain. He might be in a better state of health in a few months, but the doctor was unable to give a definite prognosis.

Mr. P. A. J. Kotze, who was leading the evidence, said General Buys had been sent home by his medical adviser on Wednesday.

Mr. De Villiers: This matter is in my discretion. I feel it is in the interests of justice and the public that the inquiry should be concluded as soon as possible. No good purpose will be served by postponing it.

He thanked Professor I. W. Simson, "for assisting him in a very competent manner". Without his assistance on medical matters he "would have been lost", the magistrate said.

Mr. De Villiers then summed up the evidence, starting with Mr. Timol's arrest on Friday, October 22, last year, in the company of Mohammed Essop.

The car in which they were travelling was stopped at a police blockade in Coronationville. Documents of the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party were found in the boot.

Mr. Timol was taken to Newlands Police Station and later to John Vorster Square.

Mr. De Villiers recalled evidence that a member of the Security Police, who was not



RAND DAILY MAIL



MRS. HAWA TIMOL... "not very truthful".

identified but was called Mr. X, entered the interrogation room on Wednesday afternoon. He told Captain J. Gloy and Captain J. van Niekerk that he knew who Quentin, Martin and Henry were.

These names had been found among the documents. Mr. Timol had been asked who they were. He told his interrogators they were social friends and he did not have their addresses.

Captain Gloy and Captain Van Niekerk left the room. Sergeant Rodrigues, who had brought their pay cheques and some coffee, stayed with Mr. Timol.

Sgt. Rodrigues told the court that Mr. Timol asked to go to the toilet. Sgt. Rodrigues got up and pushed in a chair. Then he saw Mr. Timol rushing at the window. He tried to stop him but could not. Mr. Timol pushed open the window and dived out.

On October 29 a post-mortem examination was performed by

and Mr. Maisels, Mr. De Villiers said.

He found Captain Dirker a truthful witness.

Lieutenant-Colonel Van Wyk was "a truthful and reliable witness," the magistrate said. He had been extensively cross-examined and was corroborated by Captain Bean.

Captain Bean was a truthful witness, Mr. De Villiers said, and he had no difficulty in accenting the evidence of the captains Gloy and Van Niekerk. They gave their evidence in a calm manner and were extensively cross-examined.

Captain Gloy had told the court Mr. Timol's eyes were bewildered and staring when he heard the three names from Mr. X.

Captain Van Niekerk had agreed that there was "public disquiet" immediately after Mr. Timol's death. Although he admitted that notes made during an incident were of value, he did not find it necessary to keep his concept statement, he had told the court.

He had said he would not assault a detainee who gave false evidence. An interrogator had to be patient and win a detainee's confidence, he had said.

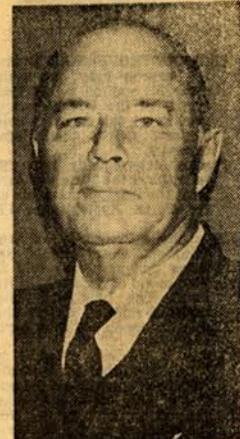
He had tried to reassure Mr. Timol when Mr. Timol told him he expected a long prison sentence.

Sergeants F. Rouwer and J. Louw corroborated, at other, the magistrate found.

Sgt. Rodrigues had been contradicted by the evidence of Brigadier C. Pattle and, to some extent, by the Rapport report, the magistrate said.

According to captains Gloy and Van Niekerk, Sgt. Rodrigues had given them substantially the same version as the one he had given in court. This was also the version he had given to General Buys.

Although his impression was that Brigadier Pattle was a truthful witness, it is possible he could have misunderstood Sgt. Rodrigues.



MR. J. J. L. DE VILLIERS... suicide verdict

sef Timol and Mrs. Hawa Timol, gave the impression in their evidence that some threat had been made to them concerning their son.

He did not think Mrs. Timol was "a very truthful witness".

She tried to make the court believe she did not understand Afrikaans. Later it became clear that she could speak Afrikaans very well, the magistrate said.

Her husband had told the court they had lived for years at Breyten in an Afrikaans community.

Mr. De Villiers found that Mr. Maisels's allegation that General Buys and Major J. F. C. Fick were "whitewashing" the incident was unfounded.

They were not members of the Security Police and their investigations were "as objective and as detailed as possible in the circumstances".

He found no collusion between the members of the police force.

Mr. De Villiers then summed

Source B: Neil Aggett - Unexpected suicide?

Advocate George Bizos at inquest acting for the Aggett family:

Well let me read to you Major what Dr Aggett says happened on that day (4th of January 1982). He says that: "I was interrogated by Lieutenant Whitehead and every time that he asked me a question and I denied it, he accused me of calling him a liar. Then this Schalk would assault me, hit me with his open hand through my face and I fell against the table with my back and I could feel a scab on my back. He also assaulted me with his fists by hitting me on the side of my temple and my chest. He also kicked me with his knee on the side of my thigh. This Schalk wore a watch which cut my right forearm and it was bleeding... Whilst I was assaulted by him he grabbed me by the scrotum and squeezed my testicles.