

## AN OVERVIEW OF POLITICAL TORTURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY THE MICROCOSM OF TORTURE INSTRUMENTS

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**Electrical props. Relatives of the bludgeon. Aggressive furniture. Domestic appliances. The “jeweller’s” utensils. Punitive crowning. Liquids, solids, powders. Hygienic instruments. Vegetal instruments. Inner and outer maiming by animals. The music of terror. “Blinding.”**

In the twentieth century, despite the emergence new sophisticated techniques in countries such as the United States or Great Britain, torture instruments continued to be rudimentary. In the latter half of the century, in the South American countries where North-American instructors had been imported, the US Embassies introduced new, more sophisticated apparatuses if torture utensils there were considered to be extremely primitive or outdated. Electric torture became the “Esperanto of the most violent states” (Wright, p. 139). This was, probably, the distinctive feature of twentieth-century punitive regimes. As torturers themselves attested, the advantage of electricity is that unlike the flesh-and-blood torture, the electroshock machine is indefatigable! Electric shocks can be applied to the most intimate bodily part (genitals, breasts, lips, ear lobes); hence the violent touch (both physical and psychological) inflicted onto the victim.

Over the course of the twentieth century, electric torture registered a variety of devices: electrodes (introduced in teeth cavities or other orifices); the electroshock machine; electric truncheons (inserted in the mouth or the anus); electrified shields and handcuffs; electric cables. One of the most perverse combinations (dubbed the “Apollo”) was used in Iran: it caused electric shocks to victims whose heads were covered with steel helmets, so that their screams could be amplified (Wright, *idem.*). Also in Iran, the electric chair bore the same nickname, the “Apollo”, as yet another parodic and, at the same time, tormenting allusion to the American space capsule. In other cases, the electroshock machine was personified by torturers through the use of endearing names: in Argentina, for instance, it was called Susana or “little Lulú.” In Brazil it was known as “the peppery

one,” the “lever” or the “spinet,” which was sometimes equipped with microphones that amplified the victim’s screams. Another popular nickname for the electric chair in South America was the “dragon’s seat.” The so-called “German chair” was equipped with scalpels and knives that would slash the victim’s body whenever the chair swivelled. The terms used for torture instruments demonstrate the ritualistic “humanisation” of soulless objects, as if they were relatives or friends of the torturer. This was the case, for instance, of a whip that was used in Paraguay and was known as the “Sergeant.” At times, additional instruments ensured the successful enforcement of electrical torture: laundry clips were used to attach electrodes to nipples, in a twisted perversion of their domestic use (Langguth, p. 164). Cruelty could be without limits. For instance, an Argentinean doctor (nicknamed Mengele) was rather adept at using a teaspoon in an abominable manner: he would insert it into the wombs of pregnant detainees up to the point where the fetuses were reached; he would then connect the teaspoon to power and send electric shocks to his victims (Rosenberg, p. 89). In Argentina, the electric *picana* (in Spanish, the verb *picar* means to prick or to jab) became the main instrument of torture. As Frank Graziano has shown (p. 142), for the Juntas (and for their massive torture squads) the *picana* was a “magical” instrument, granting them the illusion that they were mythical heroes waging war against the forces of Evil (the subversive communists). Just like mythical heroes are thought to possess miraculous weaponry (swords, shields, spears), for torturers the *picana* was, in this counterfeit mythology, a special weapon designed to correct and to punish.

Besides the electroshock machine, torture instruments used throughout the twentieth century made up an infinite Russian doll. Knives and guns were no longer the weapons of choice; instead, anything went that looked or worked like a bludgeon (sticks, bats, clubs, rods, staffs, levers, belts, or whips). On the other hand, psychic torture underwent extreme refinement, in a way that previous centuries had not experienced. Jean Pasqualini, a victim of brainwashing in China, relates how on being taken to a chamber filled with torture instruments, he feared that terrifying ordeals were in store for him (Ruo-Wang & Chelminski). His guide forewarned him, however, that this was a museum of torture and that Chinese interrogators no longer resorted to tough instruments, wishing thus to set a clear line between their techniques (re-education through labour and ideology) and the techniques of the former regime. What the guide had actually intended

to tell him was that torturers had had to adapt to the new times and that the communist state was no longer satisfied with the qualification of licensed “butchers.”

The body itself or its parts could become instruments of torture: fists, legs, knees or heads could be deftly manipulated as weapons by the torturers. The victims’ bodies sometimes also became instruments of torture: such is the case of victims being hung from the feet of other victims in Southern Vietnam. When they were not used specifically to inflict death, weapons were exploited for their sharpness. A bayonet’s tip, the muzzle of a gun or of a rifle, even a rod could be shoved inside a victim’s mouth or anus, causing a “metallic” rape; violent blows to the temples or elsewhere could be carried out with a gun or a rifle butt. Although considered “mild” forms of torture, chains and handcuffs could cause serious wounds if applied for extensive periods.

Furniture was by no means exempted from being used as violent weaponry: heaters, beds, chairs (either broken or not), closets, door handles (used for banging victims’ heads), hangers, tables (trellised or heated to incandescence), doors (used for crushing fingers), drawers (used in Algeria for smashing male victims’ genitalia) – all these furniture items were given specific usages, according to the torturers’ whims or desires to transform any object into an instrument of torture. Trunks were sometimes used as spaces for cloistering victims, whose heads were banged with the lids. This process whereby the domestic use of furniture was perverted into brutal weaponry has been referred to as the “de-objectifying of the objects” (Scarry, p. 41). In Latin America, victims, heads covered with sacks, would be tied to an iron bed and left to lie there for days on end. In China, the “tiger’s bed” was fitted with a draining orifice for urine and excrements: victims were immobilised for long periods of time, having their wrists and ankles manacled and chained. In Southern Vietnam, victims were placed onto chairs with holes in their seats; beneath them gas lamps were used to scorch the victims’ anuses. In Algeria it was customary to chain a victim to a chair, which would then be rocked until the victim fell face downwards. Crosses were used for crucifixions and not only. Domestic appliances could be used for a wide range of purposes: brooms (for beating), pencils (for scratching or tapping the genitals), rubber hoses, wet towels, sand sacks, cloths smeared in excrement (shoved down victims’ necks to provoke suffocation), hot pans or irons (used in Venezuela for scorching the victim’s skin), bottles (introduced in vaginas and anuses for the so-called rape experiments), plastic bags (for the dry “submarine”), sacks (in Cambodia victims were

put in sacks, beaten and left to lie there), iron or wooden rods (nicknamed “riders” or the “colts” in South America, these consisted in forcing nude victims to ride on the rod), barrels (victims were put inside barrels which were then rolled over staircases or smashed against walls). During the Cheka period of government, some detainees were laid in barrels with nail-covered insides; the barrels were rolled over, tearing the victims’ bodies apart just like the “Iron Maidens” had done during the Inquisition (Leggett, p. 223). In Iran, coffins were preferred: these were in fact crates in which blindfolded and handcuffed victims had to lie for entire months, with only brief intervals during which they were allowed to get out for physiological necessities. Even toothbrushes became instruments of torture when they were used for anally raping victims in Salvador. In Brazil, victims with weights tied to their hands were forced to thread on opened tins: this was known as the “Statue of Liberty” (Langguth, p. 200). Walls were used for violent smashing or as fix points: Irish convicts, for instance, were forced to face such walls for hours or even entire days. In the Nazi camps, victims were sometimes compelled to build walls, which they then had to tear down themselves. Privies were used as pestilential sites of torture.

Larger or smaller instruments (pertaining to the household) were used in thorough tortures: pliers (for pulling out nails); barbed wire (for ripping the victim apart); pincers for maiming nipples and testicles (a modern equivalent of the “Spanish spiders”, breast slashing devices dating back to the Inquisition); needles that were left to fester in the victims’ bodies for several days (during the Colonels’ Dictatorship in Greece, experiments with needles inserted into urethras were conducted); nylon ropes (for stretching out and maiming the genitals); hammers used for finger crushing; hot-iron nails; rulers for hitting fingers and hand wrists. In the USSR a special machine for pulling out nails was created. Clothing items (belts) and footwear were also frequently adapted to torture uses: boots were shoved into victims’ mouths (a Gestapo method imported by the Argentinean Juntas) or used for hammering. The Nazi invented the following torture in their concentration camps: convicts were forced to wear small-size shoes and carry 20-kilo sacks filled with sand (Feig, p. 67). Objects as commonplace as newspapers were adapted to serve as torturing utensils. In Brazil, folded newspapers were used for rape, the tougher version being the “wooden penis.” At times, one end of a folded newspaper could be set fire to. In Uruguay detainees had manifestos inserted up their anuses.

Instruments dating back to the Inquisition or adapted versions were rarely, though frantically, made use of. The Soviets sometimes resorted to an iron ring with which the victim's head was heated (Solzhenitsyn 1997, vol. I, p. 72); priests would be "crowned" with barbed wire. In Brazil, the *torniquette* (deriving from the iron helmet used by the Gestapo and pointing further backward to the medieval "skull masher") was designed to steadily crack the cranium, causing it to fracture and making the eyes pull out of their sockets (Fon, pp. 76-77). Another version was "Christ's crown", more particularly a metal ring gradually fastened around the skull (Weschler, p. 53). This torture always resulted in the victim's death. Another variant, used in the beginning in the USSR, was the cold cloth, which was applied to the head like a helmet and squeezed the cranium like a juicer: its name was "the wreath of death" and had a mankurting<sup>1</sup> effect).

Liquids, solids and stinging powders were given versatile usages. Honey, for instance, was spread onto the victim's body in order to attract devouring insects; mud could cause the victim's partial suffocation; shards of glass were used for hurting the victim's soles. Stoning was practised by the Nazis as well as by other repressive regimes. Gas and other flammable substances were applied onto wounds (in South Africa); salt and ash were used for similar purposes. Pepper, chilli powder and other irritating substances could be introduced into the victim's vagina, urethra, anus, eyes or nose. Hot wax was poured onto pregnant women's bellies. In Mauritania, as well as in the Serbian camps from Bosnia-Herzegovina, political convicts were forced to eat sand; in Pakistan, detainees had to stand barefoot on scorching sand. Sand-filled sacks were used for beating victims up, since it was well known that this method left no traces. Sand burials were commonly practised in Africa and other areas. Bug-killing sprays and tear gas became widespread during the latter half of the twentieth century. It was, however, water – either boiling hot, freezing cold or salty – that was most frequently used: in Latin America boiled water would often be poured into the victims' vaginas or anuses. Dripping water inside the victim's ears was often used in the USSR and in Nazi Germany. What really became infamous was, however, the "Chinese drop", which created a skull-bursting sensation. Drops could become, as a Cambodian victim of the above-mentioned method has confessed, solid, needle-like objects, penetrating the skull like drilling machines (Ngor & Warner, p. 305).

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<sup>1</sup> As outlined by Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov in the novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, a "mankurt" is the epitome of the indoctrinated man that the soviet state aimed to obtain through re-education techniques such as brainwashing (T.N.).

Unbearable pain would gradually grip the forehead and the temples, and an electroshocking effect generally ensued.

Burns were inflicted through the use of cigarettes (in Algeria lit cigarettes were used for anally raping the victims), candles, soldering lamps, fire launchers (in Vietnam), open fire, ovens, etc. Vegetal torture instruments also existed: thorns inserted beneath fingernails; cacti used for flagellating victims (in Venezuela); spiky shrubs (in Chile victims would be hurled naked onto such bushes); and thorny branches. The “tree” was a torture that was frequently applied by the Nazis, who would leave their victims (hands tied behind their backs) hanging from trees – a method that proved rather popular in South Africa as well. In the Nazi camps, the tree was also used in another manner: elderly convicts were forced to climb up trees; torturers would then shatter those trees, maiming their victims; humiliation was an important part of the equation, too (Kogon, p. 93). The sun could also function as an indirect instrument of torture. Exposure to scorching heat of 40 degrees and above, after several days of incarceration in cold, dark cells, could cause cranial explosion. The Japanese constantly subjected their WWII American POWs to “solar therapy”. This was, however, commonly practised in all the countries that were geographically “advantaged,” in the sense that solar heat was available to them. Conversely, similar indirect tortures would rely on exposure to freezing temperatures (in Siberia, for instance).

Torture inflicted by animals had a broad scope. Most frequently used were dogs that had been trained to maim and to rape. Snakes (especially cobras and boas) were used in Brazil and Iran; insects were also favoured by the torturers (ants and bed bugs in the USSR, spiders in Chile, and Etopola flies in Namibia). Snakes were used mostly for psychological effect, whereas insects were left to crawl on the victim’s body or inserted into various bodily orifices (such as the anus). A Buchenwald testimony mentions a bear in whose cage convicts were thrown to be mutilated (Kogon, p. 49). In India and in Vietnam chameleons and other lizards were introduced in the victims’ trousers so as to scratch and bite them. Frogs were also used (in India) to create a repulsion effect. A woman in Southern Vietnam was tortured by having an eel inserted in her womb. American prisoners from Northern Vietnam were left prey to rats who would disfigure them should they fall asleep (Hubbell, p. 408). In Argentina, torturers would sometimes use twitchy cats, which they placed inside the same sacks as their victims. At a certain point (between 1950 and 1951), Argentinean torturers resorted to hybrid beasts in order to inflict psychological and

physical suffering: namely, a mixed breed between dogs and hyenas. From Chile comes the largest number of testimonies about mice and rats forcefully introduced into victims' mouths. Sometimes having their tails set on fire, such rodents were pumped through hoses inside the victim's larynx (García Villegas, p. 80). It was the Cheka, nevertheless, that broke new ground with this method; amongst the tortures favoured by the Soviet repressive apparatus, it entailed the insertion of live rats inside pipes: since at one end, the pipes were burning, the rodents would have had to dig their way to salvation through the victims' chests (Peters, p. 129; Leggett, p. 224).

Music could sometimes serve as a means of torture: victims would be exposed to shrill and aggressive sounds which were bound to cause deafness. This technique was called the "music of terror." The victim's own voice sometimes acquired the paradoxical function of brainwashing the individual at a sound level. The case of victims from the Nazi or Gulag (whether Soviet or Chinese) camps, who were forced to sing one and the same mind-breaking song while working incessantly for hours on end, is well known.

Towels, scarves, cloths that were constantly used as blindfolds for the victims often caused them mental breakdowns: while obstructing light, these also obstructed life itself. It sometimes happened, however, for the victims to rediscover, Oedipus-like, their inner selves after going blind. The alienation process was marked, notwithstanding their suffering, by inner self-discovery. The rag covering their eyes could become a screen dividing these victims from the world of torture and screams. One such sufferer, for instance, came to perceive this blindfold as a sort of protective layer. During interrogation, he hurriedly provided all answers required so as to be able to return to the cell and isolate himself beneath the eye "blanket," since here he could no longer be "violated" (*Uruguayos desaparecidos en Argentina*, p. 7). Such cases of blissfully sublimating torture effects were, unfortunately, rather rare.

The manifold nature of torture instruments raises the issue of the role that imagination plays in conceiving suffering: throughout the twentieth century, torture registered no limits and became a sort of no man's land. Furthermore, imagination needed be correlated with the maximum or minimum equipment available to the torturer. What astounds regarding twentieth-century torture is the deftness with which apparently ordinary objects were transformed into aggressive gear, specifically aiming to tear, break, crush, rip, etc. Objects no longer pertained merely to the domestic area of human experience:

they were turned into silent “aides” of the torturers, who perverted their usage in the first place.

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