

# crimes of authority & OBEDIENCE

*The Politics of Pain: Torturers and their Masters*

Ronald D. Crelinsten and Alex P. Schmid (ed.)

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Reviewed by Brian Martin

What is there to know about torture, aside from that it's a terrible thing that should be stopped? Actually, quite a lot. That doesn't mean repulsive details about the techniques used. The important thing is to know how torture is organised socially and politically. Insights may help in stopping or preventing it.

In Australia, there are occasional isolated instances of torture, but no organised system. In nearly 100 countries, there are torture systems. Most torture occurs in an organised fashion, in an institutional context.

A valuable contribution to the understanding of torture systems is *The Politics of Pain*. It is the product of work done at the PLOOM Foundation at Leiden University, which carries out research on the causes of gross human rights violations. It is one of the few academic initiatives tackling this crucially important topic.

To understand torture systems, it is necessary to know how people can torture someone else. The key is obedience to authority. As political psychologist Herbert Kelman puts it, torture is "a crime of obedience, carried out within a hierarchical authority structure, and serving the purposes of public policy". The authorities directing the torture system are guilty of crimes of authority.

The central rationale for torture is a perceived or actual threat of violence against the state. Torture and state power are closely linked.

Numerous survivors of torture can tell about their experiences, but very few torturers or authorities ever give their point of view. Several

contributors to *The Politics of Pain* have collected first-hand accounts from torturers or interviewed responsible military officials. This information provides insight into the making of a torturer. There are case studies from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua under Somoza and Uruguay.

The torturer is carrying out a job. There are clear expectations about what it takes to do the job well. The aim is to obtain results, either confessions or breaking the will of the victim. The method used is pain. Torture is carried out against those who are considered enemies.

The life of the torturer is embedded in a wider institutional complex. There are superiors to control the process; there are doctors and psychologists to provide guidance about keeping the victim alive (killing the victim is a sign of professional failure); there are planners and builders to construct the torture chambers; and there are arrest squads to bring in the "subjects".

No-one is born a torturer. Those who become torturers are carefully selected, and then there is an arduous training process, which may involve torture of the recruits. The training breaks down previous identities and builds up a new world view in which those to be tortured are not seen as human. Yet there are some everyday reasons for becoming a torturer. For example, a soldier may want to live closer to home and join a torture group in order to do so.

Torture thrives in situations where there is large-scale violence, such as war and genocide. An armed opposition movement, as in the case of guerilla struggles in Latin America, makes torture by the army more likely. Military authorities from countries with torture systems repeatedly refer to the communist threat, to their lack of preparation to deal with guerillas and to the need to extract information concerning guerillas. Guerilla executions of military officers and their families also seem to increase the use of torture. This suggests that if challengers use non-violent methods, this is less likely to



trigger the development or expansion of torture systems.

One factor not mentioned in this book is gender. Almost without exception, torturers are men, usually quite young. Masculinity, violence and obedience are closely linked together in torture systems. Much more research is needed on this link. Only one of the nine contributors to this volume is a woman.

The most important thing to do to help stop torture is simply to speak up against it. This applies especially in countries in which it occurs, but outsiders can do a lot as well. Campaigns by Amnesty International and other human rights groups do have an impact.

Unfortunately, most people are simply bystanders. Many have an unconscious belief that the world is just: if people are tortured, then they must be guilty of something. This is certainly not the case. Many victims caught up in torture systems do not even know why they are there. In any case, torture can never be justified in a humane society.

Just because all governments officially renounce torture is no reason to be complacent. The problem is hidden but serious. Torture is unpleasant even to think about, but it deserves much more attention, both research and action. ■

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