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Book Note: Reviewing "Tortured Confessions"

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Making development a fundamental goal of relief and assistance projects is also an important factor of the proposed solution set. Korn contends that the lack of development initiatives included in current relief projects significantly limits the ability of aid to fully deliver relief. Programs and projects that provide education and job-skill training to internally displaced groups are essential if people are ever to be successfully reintegrated into their previous homes or introduced into new communities.

This book provides a concise and informative summary of the startling results of Cohen and Deng's report. In addition, the illustrative photography offers a glimpse of the human faces hiding behind the numbers and statistics. The book is an important introduction to a pervasive problem that is only now being recognized by the international community, and should be considered a significant tool for formulating innovative and effective responses to this ongoing crisis.

—Taryn Dayne Fielder

Tortured Confessions. By Ervand Abrahamian. Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1999. Pp. 284. \$45.00, cloth.

Tortured Confessions presents an innovative perspective on the relationship between torture and propaganda. While much has been written about the way propaganda spurs and sanctifies torture by demonizing "the enemy," few have explored the way torture itself is used to create propaganda. Abrahamian's work explores how the primary purpose of torture in Iran has been to extract ideological recantations from prisoners. In "interviews" considered the "proof of proofs," prisoners affirmed the omnipotence, righteousness, and intrinsic benevolence of the authorities while depicting themselves as criminals and conspirators. By videotaping these recantations and airing them on prime time TV or circulating the transcripts, the government created both positive propaganda for the authorities and negative propaganda against the enemy. Furthermore, while those sentenced to life in prison or death could potentially become revolutionary idols—symbols of uncompromising opposition, heroic resistance, and ultimate self-sacrifice—those who confessed lived in shame. Since few would admit to submission under torture and risk losing self-respect and reputation, the public failed to connect torture with recantation. Once the connection was finally made, public recantations became counterproductive for the regime and bored the public. By the mid-1990s, "The grand theater had turned into grade-B horror shows—minus the suspense." Abrahamian's persuasive account exposes the intrinsic limitations of arguments that try to explain torture as simply the result of a "traditional" regime, a desire for social discipline, or a search for security informa-

tion; he binds torture instead to ideological warfare and political mobilization, the fundamental goals of military propaganda.

The chronological narrative shows the cycles and changes in the use of torture under various regimes. The physical torment and violent deaths that characterized nineteenth-century Iran (and much of the world at that time) reemerged in 1953 after the Tudeh coup, albeit in a less violent form. While the absence of physical violence between 1930 and 1941 turned interrogations into battles of wit, prisoners experienced indiscriminate beatings and whippings between 1953 and 1958. Torture waned again in the 1960s—most Tudeh officers were released after signed “letters of regret”—only to reemerge in the 70s, when SAVAK, the secret police, was given free reign to torture suspected criminals. Abrahamian could have started his book at this point, when torture became widespread and public recantations began; instead, he chooses to include, as almost half the book, seventy years of history in which torture played a relatively minor role. Although the crux of Abrahamian’s argument appears in the latter half of *Tortured Confessions*, the first half plays an important part by showing that “one generation’s ‘torture’ is another’s inconvenience” and by breaking down the notion that nations become more “civilized” over time. In this case, the chronological format emphasizes the lack of systematic progress, as episodes of violence, prison demographics, and techniques of torture recur and reinvent themselves in cyclical, not linear, form.

By carefully documenting the cyclical use of torture, Abrahamian demonstrates that torture techniques are not “primitive” methods discarded by modern nations. In fact, modern notions and technological innovations played a crucial role in cultivating torture in Iran. SAVAK personnel were trained in the United States and Israel, where they learned “scientific” methods to prevent unwanted deaths from “brute force.” These “scientific” methods included sleep deprivation, extensive solitary confinement, and an electric chair with a large metal mask to muffle screams while amplifying them for the victim. Although the traditional *bastinado* or *falak*—an excruciating whipping of the soles of the feet—remained the torture of choice, interrogators performing the whippings now referred to each other as “doctors” or “engineers.” Technological developments also included the introduction of the videotape to Iran in the late 1970s. Now, recantations could not only be taped, but “edited, polished, and, if necessary, remade from scratch,” allowing the regime to control both their timing and content.

The second half of *Tortured Confessions* explores the use of torture under the Islamic Republic. A fascinating aspect of this section, in addition to the bombardment of propaganda that torture helped create, is the way religious sources were manipulated and sucked dry of meaningful content. Although the *sharia*, or Islamic Law, states that coerced confessions are void and the Prophet’s successors outlawed even verbal intimidation, the Islamic Republic justified all types of torture as sanctioned by *sharia*. Two bills codified important features of *sharia*: the *Qanon-e Ta’zir* (Discretionary Punishment

Law) and the *Qanon-e Qesas* (Retribution Law). Since the former permits seventy-four lashings for those found guilty of lying to the authorities, clerical interrogators gave indefinite series of seventy-four lashings until they obtained "honest answers." The *Qesas* Law, which permits death by stoning, decapitation, or hanging for certain crimes was similarly abused, and people were executed for crimes as ambiguous as "sowing corruption on earth." Thus, while the constitution outlawed torture and coerced confessions, numerous atrocities were committed during the Reign of Terror from 1981 to 1988 under the guise of *Ta'zir* Law, which permitted corporal punishment and voluntary confessions. In fact, the Islamic Republic marketed recantations as living proof of Islam's strength. Prisoners were bombarded with propaganda produced by these recantations, which were not only shown on closed-circuit televisions in the prison, but also blasted by loudspeakers into solitary cells and "coffins"—a torture apparatus that speaks for itself. Amazingly, the mass executions of 1988 have still not been discussed by Western academics.

Propaganda ordinarily provides the foundation for mistreatment, torture, and death by denying the humanity of a group of people, making them the objects of humiliation, and, of course, eroding their credibility. In Iran, the Islamic Republic and other regimes created a vicious circle where propaganda not only inspired torture, but torture turned into propaganda. Abrahamian places the phenomenon of public recantations in Iran, which ended in the mid-1990s, in the context of Maoist China, Stalinist Russia, and early modern Europe, all of which produced recantations frighteningly similar in form, language, imagery, and metaphors. More recently, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, torture was turned into propaganda in a different way. Sadistic deeds, particularly rapes, were videotaped by Serbs and widely shown to soldiers after the tapes were doctored and dubbed, making it appear as though the women were Serbian and the rapists Muslim or Croatian. Sexual assaults, which were conspicuously absent from Iranian prisons, surfaced in Bosnia as a crucial piece of propaganda. Although Abrahamian's account does not consider the case of Bosnia, it urges academics and activists alike to pay attention to the ways in which technology and torture merge to facilitate powerful new forms of propaganda.

—Fatma Marouf