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May 21, 2012



Don LaCoss

Anti-Anarchist Propaganda Reported as Historical Fact

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From *Fifth Estate* #360, Spring 2003

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An art historian announced recently that he had uncovered proof that anarchist artists had constructed secret psychological torture chambers in Barcelona for prisoners of war and political enemies during Spain's civil war.

According to him, a team of anarchists led by Alphonse Laurencic had designed a warren of jail cells that utilized advanced principles of color, abstraction, and perception developed by Bauhaus artists and the surrealists. These rooms were meant to mentally destabilize and emotionally grind down inmates who fought on the side of the clerico-fascists or who were the left-wing rivals of the CNT anarchist labor federation.

A major Spanish newspaper originally carried the story of this discovery; before long, it was translated and reported in a variety of European dailies, and was featured in the U.S. during an evening news broadcast of National Public Radio.

It's odd that an academic footnote would garner so much international attention when there are one or two other issues on the world stage that might warrant a little more coverage. Doubly strange is the fact that the evidence used by the art historian in his research came from a notoriously unreliable source that would be immediately apparent to the majority of pressroom fact-checkers, yet still the story has been dutifully re-told by professional journalists without a trace of skepticism.

From what I have seen so far, the art historian's research relies solely upon the transcript of Laurencic's confession before a Francoist military court — to be more, accurate, the source is a pamphlet published in 1939 by the fascist Solidaridad Nacional press that draws from these trial records. Written by one R.L. Chácon, the pamphlet *Porqué hicie las 'Chekas' de Barcelona* ("chekas" being term for vigilante Stalinist political police units) is regarded by researchers today as an excellent example of the show trials that had been staged by the Franco regime after the Civil War.

Franco's political theater had been inspired by a similar tactic used a few years earlier by another murderous autocrat: Stalin had rigged similar kangaroo courts in 1936 and in 1938 as a means for purging real and imagined opponents among the old-school Bolshevik elite.

In the Soviet example, the accused were tortured until they “confessed” to espionage, sabotage, or to some other ridiculous crime against Stalin and the people of the U.S.S.R.; in Franco’s Spain, captured anarchists, communists, and Republicans admitted before military tribunals that they had raped nuns, encouraged homo-sexuality, and published hardcore pornography — and, in the case of Alphonse Laurencic, psychologically tortured political prisoners with repeated screenings of Buñuel’s *Un Chien andalou* — as part of a fictitious, sprawling, Judeo-Masonic conspiracy based in Moscow.

The repression in Spain after the Civil War was brutal. Heinrich Himmler once visited Franco and advised him to cut back on sheer number of firing-squad executions, which eventually topped 300,000 deaths; our comrade and friend Federico Arcos, himself a veteran of the Civil War and of later clandestine struggles against Franco’s police state, pointed out to me that Italy’s Minister of External Affairs fondly recalls that between 200 and 250 people in Madrid alone were being executed every day starting in mid-July, 1939. Countless thousands of communist, anarchist, and social democrats were forced into slave labor gangs to construct memorials to fallen Francoist soldiers, and a half a million more were driven into exile. At a concentration camp built at a monastery near Burgos, a preeminent Spanish military psychiatrist and Catholic eugenicist forcefully interrogated captured International Brigades volunteers for a Gestapo-advised study on “the biopsychic of Marxist fanaticism” and found data to support his claim that those who struggled against fascism were “psychopaths,” “schizophrenics,” “mental retards,” and “social imbeciles.” In such a nightmarish context as this, bizarre atrocity propaganda about anarchist torturers’ use of “degenerate art” is not at all surprising.

But what about the enthusiastic way in which this story has been so uncritically circulated by large corporate news organizations in 2003? Even given the fact that mass media organs have a long, inglorious history of pimping anti-anarchist and anti-surrealist slander, it’s surprising how an unsubstantiated claim — of modern art torture centers allegedly built by libertarian socialists sixty-five years ago — could push other reports out of the spotlight, such as, let’s say, the torture of prisoners at Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay.

Yet, a highly dubious piece of fascist propaganda about psychological torture that supposedly happened half a century ago has been given a place of prominence in many major news organizations.

— February 2003, La Crosse, WI