

THE POLITICS OF TORTURE

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FOR one brief moment a door was opened on South Africa a little while ago when Suliman Saloojee, a 32-year-old Indian clerk, jumped to his death from the seventh floor of a building called The Grays. There was the merest glimpse of what is happening in the apartheid state today before the door slammed shut once more. The Grays is headquarters of the Security Police in Johannesburg. Political prisoners are brought for interrogation to the seventh floor. Saloojee, who smashed onto a parapet and died on his way to hospital, was undergoing interrogation on the 65th day of his detention in solitary confinement under the '90-day' law. (The Security Police then took action to ensure that such a thing does not happen again: they had burglar-proofing fitted to the windows of the interrogation room.) A friend wrote: 'His death caused only the slightest ripple on the surface of white opinion'. No one put a foot in the door to hold it open. Why? The answer is simple: because both inside and outside South Africa people do not want to believe in the terrible things that are happening today. To admit the truth—the systematic torture of political prisoners—to recognise it, entails acceptance of responsibility for what are not simply the occasional excesses of individual policemen, but state policy. We do not want to be told about such things. It makes us uncomfortable. It reminds us of Nazi Germany, and episodes in human behaviour that we would rather forget. True, unpleasant things have happened since then; the revelations of methods used in the Kenya emergency; French policy in Algeria—who will forget Alleg's 'La Question'? But to a certain extent they were different. They were colonial régimes and it is still possible to think in terms of lesser breeds without the law. But South Africa is a modern industrial state and an ardent upholder of Western civilisation. Wasn't Saloojee, perhaps, just someone who was a bit unbalanced?

The incident cannot be so lightly put aside. There are now too many suicides, unexplained deaths, cases of insanity, and affidavits of torture. Hundreds of African political prisoners have been subject to shock treatment in which the procedure is standardised throughout all jails. The victim is forced to crouch, with knees bent and wrists handcuffed in front of them; a pole is placed over his arms and under his knees, making movement impossible; a sack is put over his head, wires tied to his fingers. Half-suffocated, violent elec-

tric shocks jerk his body. Sometimes he is raised above the ground by the pole, shocked, then allowed to fall to the ground, kicked and beaten or whipped with a hosepipe.

White political prisoners have only recently become subject to physical violence. A form of torture that the Portuguese devised and call 'The Statue' is now being used. Testimony comes from many sources, including three former 90-day detainees (they are now charged with political offences and awaiting trial), Norman Levy, vice-principal of a Johannesburg college, Paul Trehwela, a journalist and Costa Gazides, a doctor. In sworn affidavits they describe how they were made to stand for days and nights without moving or resting while continuously subject to interrogation by relays of Security men, hauled to their feet when they collapsed, and brought round with buckets of water when they fainted. After 48 consecutive hours of standing, Levy was allowed to crawl back to his cell, only to be fetched again for questioning. Trehwela was made to stand for 69 hours during which time he was able to snatch about four hours' sleep at intervals. Gazides stood for 43 hours without a break. Ivan Schermbrucker smuggled a note out to his wife written on toilet paper describing how he was tortured and nearly ended his own life. When his wife made an urgent application to court to stop the torture, the court ruled they had no jurisdiction whatsoever over 90-day detainees.

Because physical torture is in a way a measurable thing and perhaps more dramatic, it receives a certain amount of publicity. But the mind-breaking of the 90-day law is in some ways more horrible. The law empowers police officers to arrest without warrant and detain without trial for any number of 90-day periods. Victims are held in tiny cells, without furniture, in solitary confinement, allowed only two short exercise periods a day (and often not given even that). They are not allowed any books, pens, paper, or work of any kind, nor may they speak to anyone. No one can visit them or write to them. *Nobody held in this way for any length of time emerges the same as when they went into solitary confinement.* 'Psychiatrists, psychologists and scientists of world reputation will, without exception, tell you that prolonged isolation is the cruelest kind of torment' states Hamilton Russell (South African M.P.). The specialists call it 'sensory deprivation' and their experiments produce consistent patterns of mental unbalance. Hundreds of men, women and children as young as 15, 16 and 17 have been subject to this cruelest kind of torment for varying periods. Alfred Nzo spent 270 days

alone in a tiny cell; Morris Motsemela endured solitary confinement for 345 days. (The Geneva Convention lays down 30 days as the maximum solitary confinement for prisoners of war.)

With each new political trial Cabinet Ministers and police chiefs declare that subversion in South Africa has now been brought to an end. The Rivonia trial was announced as the final blow against the liberation movement; since Rivonia, hundreds more have been and are, on trial throughout the country. More sensational trials are to come. A lawyer estimates there are now between ten and fifteen thousand children of political prisoners who are in need of assistance. These dependants, these trials, are the living evidence that apartheid cannot work. And torture is the terrible proof of the failure of Verwoerd's Nationalist government.

It took the Nationalists fifteen years to arrive at the stage where torture became the method used to destroy opposition to apartheid. It was not something that broke onto the South African scene overnight, like the gangsters of Hitler in 1933. It has been, rather, a slow but steady progression, springing logically but not swiftly from the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. This Act, which illegalised the Communist Party of South Africa, began a purge of trade unions and progressive organisations. It established a list of 'named' people (people named as Communists under the wide definitions of the Act, and including *statutory communists*, i.e., people who have never been members of the Communist Party nor even supporters of communism, but having been convicted of some political offence under the Act, may then be listed as such and become subject to the various bans and restrictions).

The Act was designed to destroy the spearhead of opposition to apartheid and to silence its most determined opponents. Trade unions were stripped of their most experienced leaders: the Communist Party was driven underground. But in its purpose, the Suppression Act failed. Resistance grew: it was organised resistance, manifesting itself by 1953 in the Campaign of Defiance Against Unjust Laws, when nearly 10,000 people went to jail for deliberately breaking various apartheid laws. New and more repressive laws ended this form of protest, but the African National Congress and allied organisations sought and found new ways of expressing their opposition to apartheid. In these years, even under stringent conditions, and in the face of individual victimisation and bannings, the peoples' organisations continued to grow in strength and support. 1955 was the year of the Congress of the People, the truly repre-

sentative gathering that adopted the Freedom Charter as a programme for South Africa. This was followed by country-side raids, culminating in the arrest of 156 leading Congress supporters of all races, and the 4½-year long treason trial.

The trial immobilised the peoples' leaders and placed an enormous strain on the liberation movement as a whole, yet at the end of it, all the accused were acquitted and the Nationalists had failed to remove or silence those determined to organise against apartheid. While the treason trial was still in progress, the Sharpeville shootings, when 87 Africans were killed in cold blood by police fire, sparked off a wave of horror and world protest. As pass-burning, led by Chief Lutuli the A.N.C. president, swept the country, a state of emergency was declared and jail doors closed on thousands of political prisoners who were detained without trial for periods up to five months. By the time the emergency was lifted, the A.N.C. and P.A.C. (Pan-African Congress) were illegal; old forms of struggle were disappearing from the South African scene. It was no longer possible to hold meetings or demonstrations; there were, in any case, almost no individuals in the Congress or trade union movement who were permitted to speak or to belong to any organisations. Forms of opposition such as petitions and deputations were virtually outlawed.

Confronted with laws that had put a halt to all open and non-violent methods of protest, the Congress movement made one last attempt to oppose apartheid by peaceful means, and to demand human rights. This took the form of the All-in African Convention of 1961, which decided to call a stay-at-home strike in protest against the declaration of the Nationalist Republic in May 1961. To organise this strike the A.N.C. leader, Nelson Mandela, left home and family to live underground. The strike was partially successful. The mobilisation of police and armed forces turned the Republic celebrations into an operation designed to suppress the strike and destroy its leaders. But May 1961 was a turning point. Police action, bans and restrictions, raids on homes, political trials, the suppression of newspapers and magazines had finally destroyed all forms of protest and silenced political leaders. At the end of the year the first acts of sabotage took place; the struggle had entered a new and more deadly phase.

Sabotage produced government reaction: the Sabotage Act with its terrible 90-day law that virtually ends law. Some critics blamed sabotage for this law. But in truth the cause was continued resistance

to apartheid, continued struggle for rights. This struggle throughout the years had focussed world attention on to South Africa. From the United Nations downwards, governments, international bodies and organisations, political parties and individuals condemned apartheid and endeavoured to isolate South Africa in the fields of culture, sport and trade. These international acts did not arise spontaneously through dislike of the racial policies but were in fact world response to South Africa's liberation struggle; a reflection of the tenacity, the ingenuity, the courage and the strength with which the people of South Africa had continued to fight, regardless of increasing police terror and near-fascism imposed on them.

Thus the 90-day law, with its awful consequences of systematic and legalised torture, of torture now used as an instrument of state policy, of torture connived at by the 'upholders' of the law (the police, the judiciary, the courts) has swept its destruction across the people of South Africa. It has put political leaders, men of mature understanding and outstanding personality such as Mandela, Sisulu, Kathrada and hundreds and hundreds of others into jail; in the penal Robben Island, in Rooi Hell in Port Elizabeth, in Leeukop and dozens of other prisons. It has sent some men to death. It has made heroes like Ngudle and Saloojee take their own lives to end the torture and stop them betraying their comrades. It has destroyed others, morally or physically. It has broken organisations of even moderate views, crushed the Liberal Party, disrupted students' organisations, invaded the Universities, and terrorised the people as a whole. It has produced an endless series of trials in which evidence of torture is ruled as inadmissible or having no bearing, and in which, with fists proudly raised in the Congress salute, giving a last defiant shout of 'Amandla! Ngwethu!' (Strength—it is ours!) the bravest and the best are sent to long years of incarceration, or to death.

But it is not enough for the rest of the world, watching from a distance, to condemn in resolution; or even to seek the exclusion of South Africa from various world bodies. For the use of torture as a political weapon, enforced through state policy, places a new responsibility on the rest of the world. It raises, in the clearest possible way, fundamental issues that strike at the very roots of mankind's existence and confronts humanity with the crisis of decision.

South Africa holds a mirror up to humanity. We look in the mirror and recoil in horror, for reflected there we see the image of a beast. The beast may be given a name—Goering, Eichman, Bal-

thazar Vorster, Captain Swanepoel—it is not important. For the beast is ourselves. We can turn away, like the German people did, like most whites in South Africa are doing, but by this act we strike ourselves down and can never again be completely whole.

Or we can set out to change the image in the mirror. In this we must act not as individuals but as part of society. Our trade unions, our political parties, our organisations of all types are the tools through which we improve and change our world. Boycotts, sanctions, mass action of all kinds must be pursued thoroughly, purposefully, successfully.

To do this, to join in world action against apartheid, is not simply an act of international brotherhood to assist political prisoners in South Africa's jails; it is part of mankind's long struggle to lift himself out of the primal swamps, and to shape a civilisation that permits the full flowering of the human spirit. These are the politics of torture in South Africa today. If we long to know happiness, it leaves us no choice.
