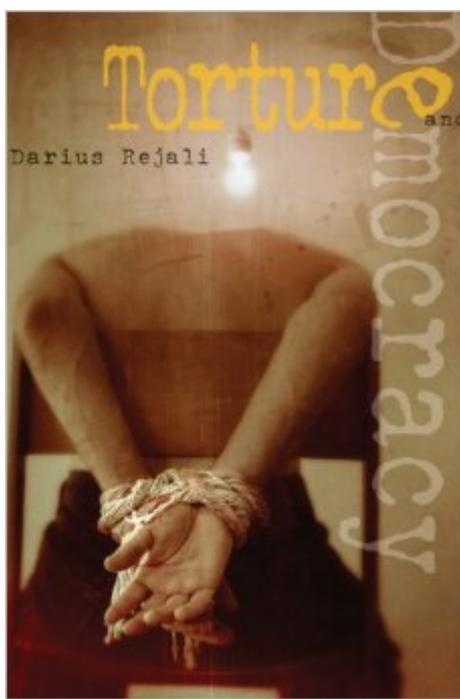


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Torture And Democracy



Synopsis

This is the most comprehensive, and most comprehensively chilling, study of modern torture yet written. Darius Rejali, one of the world's leading experts on torture, takes the reader from the late nineteenth century to the aftermath of Abu Ghraib, from slavery and the electric chair to electrocution in American inner cities, and from French and British colonial prison cells and the Spanish-American War to the fields of Vietnam, the wars of the Middle East, and the new democracies of Latin America and Europe. As Rejali traces the development and application of one torture technique after another in these settings, he reaches startling conclusions. As the twentieth century progressed, he argues, democracies not only tortured, but set the international pace for torture. Dictatorships may have tortured more, and more indiscriminately, but the United States, Britain, and France pioneered and exported techniques that have become the lingua franca of modern torture: methods that leave no marks. Under the watchful eyes of reporters and human rights activists, low-level authorities in the world's oldest democracies were the first to learn that to scar a victim was to advertise iniquity and invite scandal. Long before the CIA even existed, police and soldiers turned instead to "clean" techniques, such as torture by electricity, ice, water, noise, drugs, and stress positions. As democracy and human rights spread after World War II, so too did these methods. Rejali makes this troubling case in fluid, arresting prose and on the basis of unprecedented research--conducted in multiple languages and on several continents--begun years before most of us had ever heard of Osama bin Laden or Abu Ghraib. The author of a major study of Iranian torture, Rejali also tackles the controversial question of whether torture really works, answering the new apologists for torture point by point. A brave and disturbing book, this is the benchmark against which all future studies of modern torture will be measured.

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Customer Reviews

To paraphrase a famous quotation, when it comes to victims of torture often are victims in countries of liberty and face death from "clean torture" such as waterboarding often in the most democratic countries. Author Darius Rejali has produced a scholarly examination of the use of torture, its cost to society and which societies it occurs in with TORTURE AND DEMOCRACY a compelling, powerful book that isn't for the squeamish. As Rejali points out while barbaric customs such as the severing of limbs that are catrurized with blow torches doesn't occur here, the use of waterboarding and other "enhanced" techniques (to use an almost Orwellian obfuscation of the truth) that aren't torture because we use a euphemism that robs the phrase of its true meaning and, as a result, responsibility for something inhumane, does occur here along with other inhumane practices. Ironically, using waterboarding which seems an "acceptable" form of torture today to gather information (that can often be inaccurate--there's no way to tell as no one has truly done an unbiased study looking at information gathered by non-torture and torture techniques comparing their accuracy) resulted in a Japanese officer named Yukio Asano tried for war crimes during WWII, doesn't even cause the blink of an eye in the intelligence community in the 21st century. These "clean" forms of torture allow there to be no physical scars (although there are psychic ones that may never heal) and makes it more difficult to prove that they occurred. This creates the perfect atmosphere for denial in an open society such as a democratic one or even in a dictatorship making it more difficult for the eyes of the world to see all the victims these forms of torture claim.

Why are so many people, including high ranking people who should know better, so convinced that torture "works," and that it provides reliable intelligence? Do they have supporting data to back up this assertion, or is it just a gut feeling? Well, now we are just a little closer to tossing this bizarre view point to the trash heap of history. Darius Rejali, in his painstakingly researched book "Torture

and Democracy," has investigated the records of numerous countries that conducted torture throughout the 20th century, including France during the Algerian uprising and the Germans during WWII. He has convincingly shown, with actual data and analysis, that torture is ineffective for intelligence gathering simply because it produces an avalanche of disinformation, making it almost impossible to separate any real intelligence from false leads. It is clear to me that Rejali did not begin his project fifteen years ago (prior to 9/11, BTW) with any preconceived notions that he then set out to prove. As he explains, he was actually trying to find out why so many countries, including democracies (though generally in secret), resort to the tactic. His initial thought was that maybe there is something to it, since so many countries repeatedly make use of the approach as an intelligence gathering tool. It was only after conducting years of exhaustive research, thoroughly catalogued in the book, that he realized that the countries who resort to the tactic do so out of ignorance and because they fail to think through what they are doing. And it turns out that many countries, even the Nazis in Germany, eventually figure out that the approach is counter-productive, and eventually revert back to more "traditional" police methods to gather intelligence.

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