



The History of Torture (History Classics)

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'Morality is nothing more than an expression of expediency' a notorious torturer reportedly once replied to objections about his profession. From the primitive snake pit to sophisticated methods of brainwashing, literally thousands of techniques have been devised to distort both the body and the mind - and to satisfy the sadistic needs of those who command, perform and witness human torture. In *The History of Torture*, Daniel P. Mannix examines with honesty and thoroughness every aspect of torture: the professional torturers, many of them history's most famous men and women; their theories and techniques; the role torture has played in history; and the refinements brought to the practice of torture by individual fanatics, religious groups, the military and entire cultures. The result is information on the infliction of pain for punishment or coercion from pre-history to modern times. This remarkable work discusses not only the history of torture but its moral implications as well. Everyone interested in the long and difficult course of human rights, personal and political freedom and in the history of crime and punishment will find the book fascinating and enlightening.

The History of Torture (History Classics) Details

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Devo says

This book is poorly set up. Where's my index? How will I figure out where the part on the Inquisition is, or the part on water torture used during the Salem Witch Trials?!? Still, it is informative. I'll give it that.

Jay says

Picked this up at the Royal Armoury museum in Leeds, and its one I take with me when I go anywhere because, unlike works of fiction, I don't tend to read this too fast. It gives a great insight into the various torture methods through the ages, but also goes into the history behind the mechanics, materials and the inventors.

Isaac says

This book contains no contents, chapter titles, or even an index so I'll write a brief overview of what it covers here.

Chapters 1-3: Earliest documented cases of torture in the Ancient world - beginning with the case of the Maccabees and their torture at the hands of the Syrians and ending with the Roman games (presumably drawing on Mannix's other book "Those about to Die").

Chapters 4-5: Early Christian era/Middle Ages. The rise of the Inquisition, and witch-hunting. Special attention is paid to the famous Torquenada.

Chapters 6-7: Examples from the later Middle Ages. Pays special attention to Nuremburg and Franz Schmidt. Also looks at "fake" devices like the Iron Maiden, apparently created solely for the vivid imaginations of tourists.

Chapters 8-11: The trials, torture, and executions of animals (yep!). England from the Tudor period up to about the early 18th century. Tower of London, the Tyburn hill executions, and the life of Jack Ketch (a famous executioner). Matthew Hopkins (the inspiration for the 60s horror film "Witchfinder General") is in here too and apparently had a fittingly ironic death.

Chapter 12: Growing strength of the abolition movement in the 19th century. The end of legal torture for heretic/witch trials. Man traps on private land and flogging in the navy.

Chapter 13-15: Exile as a form of punishment in the 19th century (e.g. to America and Australia). Methods of torture in the east (i.e. China, India, Turkey), the Americas (e.g. native Americans and Aztecs) and Pre-Colonial Africa (i.e. Benin, Kano).

Chapter 16: America. Slavery, lynching, and the "third degree" in the Old West (19th century).

Chapter 17: Nazi death camp at Dachau (20th century).

Chapter 18: Electricity as a torture device. Example of Lombilla in a prison in Argentina (20th century).

Chapter 19: Independence wars (i.e. Colonial Kenya and Algeria) and brainwashing in communist states (i.e. China and Russia).

Chapter 20: Conclusion begins by repeating specific examples that illuminate whether torture is a "deterrent" to crime, and ends by discussing the present day (in the 1960s that is) challenges of criminal rehabilitation and juvenile delinquency.

Review

I find rating non-fiction difficult. I can't seem to rate them anything other than 4 stars. I'm not exactly knowledgeable to spot any factual errors either so I'm not really qualified to write a review like this.

But anyway! If you want an overview of different cultures that have used torture throughout history (with a focus on Europe) with a sociological bent, then this is your book! Serious academics beware however; this book lacks references and bibliography. That said, Mannix clearly knows his subject, and has done a ton of research. A few passages have the air of sensationalism about them and the level of detail drops as we reach the 20th century, but I was very impressed at the range of examples.

Despite being written in the 60s - which ordinarily might as well be the stone age for a work of popular history - this book delivers the historic and geographical sweep that the ambitious title promises. The best thing, however, is the question it asks:

Does torture act as a deterrent to crime? One thing this book proves to you; our ancestors definitely thought so.

Robert says

Pretty gruesome, but extremely educational.

Robyn says

ouch.

Jenn says

This book is a general survey on torture techniques used throughout the ages and is not meant to be a scholarly work on Crime and Punishment. I found it to be informative on the methods that men have used to inflict pain on their fellow man; some of it is quite graphic. It is not exhaustive by any means.

Andrew says

Don't mistake my 2 stars for it not being a good, informative book, but it's not something that I think many would "enjoy". Makes your skin crawl to read.

Erik Graff says

Maine Township High School South in Park Ridge, Illinois had a student bookstore which posted its most popular books by sales figures on a regular basis. For quite some time The History of Torture was #1. At first I thought it rather deplorable. Eventually, following the herd, I bought and read it myself. While I recall some of the peculiar means of torture described in the text (such as rolling the victim down a hill in a barrel studded with nails), I don't recall much reflection or commentary on the part of the author. This may merely reflect my poor memory--or the fundamentally sensationalistic nature of the text.

nick says

As with any academic publication a comment should be made on how useful and informative it is. the history of torture is in my opinion an interesting starting point for further research however (and perhaps this is altered in later versions of the book) the book lacks a decent coherent story. the chapters often feel like a collection of real horror stories with little analytic value, fun to read but does one learn something extraordinary? Not very much.

Still as I said it remains a good book to start further reading in to the subject and for that 3 stars

Fredrick Danysh says

Torture has been used by many cultures throughout history. This work examines several different methods.

Kenneth says

A survey of the actors and techniques, this is a popular work, not an academic study - there are no reference notes and bibliography. Nonetheless it is an excellent survey of its subject, from ancient times through the Middle Ages and into Modern Times.

Romanticwildfire says

In view that torture is still used in the USA and the world throughout, I set out to try to understand this inhumane practice. I could only read a couple of pages a week. It was a very devastating topic to read about.

It has lowered my estimation of the human race. We are nothing more than animals if we sit back and accept that the FBI, CIA, terrorists and governments (legal terrorists) continue this practice. If someone has earned his elimination from society then get rid of him or her. Everybody should read about the history of torture. You do not even know in your wildest imagination some of the techniques used. I was first exposed to this idea in the Cuban Missile Crisis during the 60s in Miami. Rumors that Castro was torturing people by the removal of their fingernails. This was a horrible thought for a young child to even hear about. What a disgusting world we live in.

Oliver Eike says

It was the worst of times, it was the most painful of times.

Great book to read during Christmas for that holiday cheer. :)

The book goes through much of the human history of torture and executions with just enough detail to impress upon you the darkness of humanity. For often public torture and executions were treated as entertainment the same way we treat Idol or got talent.

It shows the importance of a mixture of psychology and medical knowledge in general to better break a human mind. How the Inquisition has given us techniques that have been so popular even today like the water-boarding.

My only complaint about this book is that i wish it would give reference its sources better.

A good book to read if you want a glance at how far humanity has come when it comes to the value of life. And i mean that seriously, for life in our day and age is vastly different than say just 50 to a 100 years ago. And this book does much to show that.

Tristan Goding says

This was kind of an odd book because it featured very little in the way of presentation, but I actually found its lack of any headings and/or reference to work in its favor as you are spared the typical orderliness in favor of the harsh truth of such things. The manner of which this information is presented is sparse, direct, and lacking in any pretension. The end result is both fascinating and informative.

Stephanie Wasek says

Really well-organised and clearly written. Really appreciate an author who writes informational-yet-conversational, and who doesn't feel the need to sensationalise where simply having a clear narrative vision will do. Bleakly funny in several spots, fascinating particularly when recounting the evolution of torture in Western Europe, and full of surprising ancillary facts (e.g. the discussing of Leiderfrost's phenomenon in relation to fire/heat tortures). Absolutely solid book, with the added bonus you'll get an extra wide berth when reading it on the tube.
