

Don't give up, don't give out

Tortures and confessions

BOAK

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Contents

Where do the principles originate from?	3
It wasn't better before	4
Experience of revolutionaries	4
How to resist torture?	5
What is wrong with inquisition?	6
Dubovsky case	6
A few more words	7
Conclusion	7

Since 2017 our movement has faced the repressions of the scale and intensity previously unseen. The main “spice” of the situation is massive usage of tortures by FSB secret service. Before the cases of beatings and tortures of the anarchists in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus were mere separate exclusions. We’ve heard that Jihadists and Fascists are tortured brutally. Someone would also recall “Odessa case” against communists and anarchists. But one thing is “to know” abstractly and to experience on your own is something very different.

The tortures resulted in many guys, who found themselves in hands of the secret servicemen, have made confessions against their comrades and collaborated with the investigators.

Current crisis of the anarchist movement throughout all Eastern Europe is designed not only by old splits and harsh repressions. There is the thing which plays probably even more destructive role. This is the challenge of tortures, confessions, betrayal...

How to evaluate giving out of the comrades performed simultaneously by many arrested people? Can tortures become an excuse for it? How to react when among people cracked by the FSB agents appear some really “popular” members of the scene like Igor Shishkin from the “Network case”?

There is no way to avoid these questions. Because finally they impose the main challenge: is modern anarchist movement really something serious? How much sense actually it makes for it to exist?

The story of tortures and confessions constitutes the most important ethical drama of the current anarchist movement. We can not move forward before we deal with it.

A palette of opinions, which can be heard in anarchist circles, can be put into range between two extremes: “There is no guilt in confessions made under tortures” and “It is totally unacceptable to provide the enemy with any new information regardless of the circumstances. Everyone who did this is a betrayer, snitch, informer”.

Spoiler: the truth here is NOT somewhere in between. It is much closer to the second judgment. However it is not fully equal to it. Let’s engage into details.

Where do the principles originate from?

The fact that “snitching is unacceptable” we learn from our early childhood. However: why unacceptable?

Especially in case of tortures. If we look at the situation from the exclusively personal perspective. It is quite easier to give tormentors what they want and finish your physical misery by this.

There are several reasons why it is not acceptable. The minimum one: while starting together to perform the activity potentially repressed by the state people suppose the safe-keeping of common secrets. Giving them out – is clear break of this trust. Nobody will take risk knowing from the start that if conditions turn bad then a comrade will give everything out to the persecutors.

However the most powerful reason not to let yourself to crack out is another one. Giving the information to the enemy you literary break the lives of other people. And most probably – of the people not that alien to you (as soon as it happened you know something about them). They will also go through tortures and prison for years because of you.

However finally this reasons are still questionable. Actually it is so for any ethical statement. The demand not to give out other people to the enemy can not be fully “rationally” proved. But

collective tradition, culture and experience tell us that this demand is justified. If we would speak the language of Kropotkin we would call it “ethical feeling”.

Basing on the same grounds we prioritize collective responsibilities before personal comfort. And also these responsibilities don't have “expiry date”. Somebody got disappointed and left the movement, but after a while still found oneself on the chair in front of the interrogator and then gave out his/her former comrades. The guilt of such person doesn't become softer.

So we take it as a principle – it is not allowed to give the enemy any real data concerning other people. The fact that violation of this rule leads to really hard consequences for the people betrayed – this violation itself is a hardest guilt. The only question remaining is: if tortures or anything else can be taken as a “guilt softener” or partial excuse?

It wasn't better before

Of course we can recall examples of people from the movement faced repressions and provided persecutors with important information. The first case to review is from the year 2010. Back then almost simultaneously in Russia (after the attack on the building of the city government in Khimki) and in Belarus (after a series of direct actions) the anarchist movement faced repressions. Torture, as far as we know, was used only in rare isolated cases and with a level of brutality lower than we have since 2017. Still, in both countries there were people who agreed to cooperate with the special services. In all identified cases the community had condemned and banished the informants.

So, the anarchist “collective mind” was led by the principle that there is no excuse for testimonies against comrades because of threats, fear or psychological manipulation. You can hardly disagree with this approach. It doesn't matter if they threaten you or, on the contrary, play a “good policeman”, you have an enemy in front of you, and you are not allowed to give him any information about your comrades.

Even if a new and young participant of the movement is under pressure, it is expected that a person comes into a radical community already with a certain pre-established moral code in which the principle of “**never grass anyone up**” is on the first place. It seems even strange to talk over it, but recent years taught us that it is necessary. The question of a condescending attitude towards testimonies did not arise in the anarchist community ten years ago. It wasn't better before, it was just easier.

So, testimonies under verbal and psychological pressure is unambiguously unacceptable. But what about physical torture?

Experience of revolutionaries

It's not that easy to find a specific examples of attitude towards testimonies under tortures in the normative documents of the revolutionary organizations of the past. The statute of the executive committee of “Narodnaya Volya” (“People's Will”) laconically instructs to keep all the secrets of the organization in deep secrecy.

There is a short line without details also in the mini-manual of the Urban Guerrilla by Carlos Marighella: “Those who go to the police of their own free will to make denunciations and accusations, who supply information and who finger people, must be executed when they are caught

by the urban guerrillas”. There is a film “Four Days in September” which pictures the struggle of Marighella and his comrades. It is interesting that the heroes of the film don’t doubt that their captive companion-in-arms will speak under torture. And they liberate him later anyway. Movie is movie: the author does not know how it actually happened.

“The Green Book” of IRA devotes a lot of pages to psychological preparation for arrest, interrogation and beatings to help partisans to keep silence. However, the text does not give a direct moral estimate of testimony under torture. And the tortures mentioned in the Green Book are limited by beating and firing a prisoner with cigarettes. Plugging in an electric cable to the genitals and torture by electroshock weapon may have not been the realities of 1970s Northern Ireland. Modern Russian and Belarusian special services act more brutally.

Thus, the principle of not testifying by all means is an unwritten law in revolutionary movements, something axiomatic.

In the USSR, during the World War II, it was unacceptable for partisans and underground fighters to betray their comrades, without regard of any Gestapo torture. For example, Viktor Tretyakovich, the “Young Guard’s” commissar (“Young Guard” was Soviet underground organization in German-occupied city of Krasnodon), is still considered a controversial figure due to the suspicion that before his execution he could not stand the torture and gave the names and addresses to the Nazis. However many researchers deny this version.

It is being told sometimes that in the hands of “professionals” no one can stand torture. This opinion has its reasons. And yet it is wrong. There are documented examples when people endured terrible torture. There are not a few. Let’s see one of them.

Boris Donskoy, Left Socialist-Revolutionary who killed the commander of German occupation corps von Eichhorn in Kiev in 1918. Boris was captured at the place of the operation. “After he was brought to the jail, he was immediately bound to a bed and tortured, demanding to hand over his accomplices. They tortured him for three days, replacing each other: they burned, pricked, cut, thrust pins and spikes under his nails, plucked all his toenails...” – wrote in her memoirs Irina Kakhovskaya, the comrade of Boris Donskoy. Donskoy said only his name, origin, party affiliation and the motives for his actions. Not a word about companions-in-arms. His “testimony” became actually a political statement.

I would repeat: such examples are not unique at all.

How to resist torture?

Everyone who’s ever faced torture or just a beating in a police station knows how scary, painful and humiliating it is. And how difficult it is not to give in and not to give them what they want.

The torturer’s task is to subjugate you mentally. It’s important to remain lucid, to try and run your own game, depending on the situation, feigning fear, exaggerating your physical suffering - mislead and confuse torturers in any way possible.

Methods for withstanding torture - something we almost never talk about. From what can be said: when it becomes unbearable, try to make up some false version of events, where none of the real persons or data appear, “fixate” on it, make yourself believe it, insist on it during torture.

But it’s better, of course, to keep silent.

Anarchist comrade Azat Miftakhov has shown another effective way of action. When the torturing started, he cut his own wrists (with non-lethal transverse cuts) so the police had to stop and call medical personnel.

What is wrong with inquisition?

We contend that **it can never be “normal” or “acceptable” to turn over people and information to the repressive organs.** Torture situation is not an exception. For our whole movement and for each and every one of us the principle should be: **torture, prison or even death is better than betraying comrades and giving information to the enemy.**

When you hear a person say “testimony under torture is free of judgment”, you lose all trust in this one. You realize that even a mere smack upside the head could be enough to make this one sing like a canary. If such an approach is tolerated, a movement would never recruit and raise strong stoic people within its ranks. **Without strong people there would be no radical changes.**

Then what’s wrong with the statement: “everyone who “talks” is a traitor”? Yes, it is possible to resist torture. But obviously not everyone is able to, even if they sincerely want to. No person could know whether they would endure torture with dignity if they have never faced it before.

Those who resisted their tormentors but in the end had to give in due to really brutal physical pressure, surely cannot be our comrades, probably cannot be later once again involved in the anarchist movement (even though we need to consider separately every case). But is it fair to call him a traitor who should be punished? Probably not.

It should not be confused with tolerance towards testimonies against the comrades. **It will always remain a gravest fault.** It is the duty of each of us to give our best and even more to remain pure.

Dubovsky case

The behavior of Dmitry Dubovsky, Belarusian anarchist-partisan, caused a lot of debate within the movement. This story is not about torture but one cannot ignore it while talking about testimonies and cooperation with investigation, as it’s now the most recent example.

It would be foolish to deny that Dmitry, as the police video shows us, had told more than was needed, providing a detailed picture of who, when and where was standing passing bottles of gasoline. Such specifics should be kept off police and public records. However, there is no reason not to believe his explanation – that he and his comrades have agreed beforehand that in case of detention they won’t deny their actions, it would be their political statement. If this were not so, other members of the group would have reported about it by now. So until other members of the group offer their comments, who does know better?

Maybe Dmitry, through folly and confusion, fulfilled their agreement poorly. Some have rushed to brand him as “snitch and traitor” - the worst accusation for a revolutionary. It’s a shining example of inquisition-like approach. To put such a stigma there must be some substantial grounds, and in this case there are none.

In case of Dubovsky we face complicated challenge: how to turn the dock into political tribune? This is quite traditional practice during revolutionary history. The words that were said

in the court-hall may turn into the powerful tool of revolutionary propaganda. However for this an imprisoned comrade needs to state openly his ideas and probably at least some of his actions.

The main question: do the actions of the imprisoned comrade aim in propaganda from behind the bars or these are the confessions planned to protect own ass.

We can put criteria like this: do the confessions lead to new arrests, expose internal mechanisms of movements' activities, worsen the situation of other prisoners in turn for softening the situation of the one making statements? Does it promote the ideas which put behind the actions? Also in case when there is a group arrested – there needs to be an agreement between the arrested comrades on the public statements, it is not acceptable to decide such stuff on your own.

According to this criteria no adequate reasons to judge Dmitry Dubovsky for betrayal and snitching are seen.

A few more words

The torture situation has two more important aspects. At first: the very fact of torture allows you to comprehend fully, not just by word, but from experience, that the State and all its representatives are our real enemies, violent and ruthless. We must fight them relentlessly and with determination.

Second one: the movement should **defend itself against traitors**. If we're talking about serious struggle - those who supplied police with information, who testified in court - should face retaliation, just how it was in the times when revolution didn't smell like an imitation. This issue has not been seriously discussed among the current anarchists so far. To establish retaliation as an institution within anarchist movement – one of our most important tasks, as shocking as it sounds.

Conclusion

Modern trends: comprehensive ego-centrism, fixation on one's own "traumas" and its "healing", - do not contribute to building resilience to repressions. If we prioritize personal comfort and prosperity – we are two steps away from favoring it over our beliefs, ethical principles and safety of our comrades.

Modern culture broadcasts an apology of weakness. Like a sacred human right not to show courage and other eminent qualities in a difficult situation, but to break and give in. It is necessary to understand limits of human being's capabilities and treat one in a humane manner but **an apology of weakness** is wrong and obviously disastrous.

Yes, to demand refraining from testimony under torture at all costs – is to demand extraordinary fortitude, but it's deeply rooted in our culture, it's ingrained in us since childhood.

It's an inhumane moment when our right to weakness ceases to function and gives way to our duty to show inner strength.

Phil Kuznetsov and comrades

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